



# PRETTY MISS NEVILLE

BY B.M. CROKER.



JAMES THORNTON

## SIX SHILLING NOVELS.

GRETCHEN. By RITA.

MAD. By the MARQUIS BIDDLE-COPE.

LUCK AT THE DIAMOND FIELDS. By D. J. BELGRAVE.

JOHN O' LONDON. By SOMERVILLE GIBNEY.

THE STORY OF ANTHONY GRACE. By G. MANVILLE FENN.

THROUGH GREEN GLASSES. By F. M. ALLEN.

AT THE RED GLOVE. By K. S. MACQUOID.

A BIRD OF PASSAGE. By B. M. CROKER.

HIS HELPMATE. By FRANK BARRETT.

A TERRIBLE LEGACY. By G. W. APPLETON.

THE MASTER OF THE CEREMONIES. By G. MANVILLE FENN.

IN JEOPARDY. By G. MANVILLE FENN.

THE ALIENS. By HENRY F. KEENAN.

AS IN A LOOKIN'

A LUCKY YOUNG

TEMPEST DRIVE

A MENTAL STRU

LIL LORIMER. I

THE SACRED NU

THE CHILCOTES.

### THREE-A

PASSAGES FROM'

IN LUCK'S WAY.

MISS ELVESTER'

WHERE TEMPEST

THE DIAMOND L

THE FOX AND TH

FROZEN HEARTS.

By G. W. APPLETON.

JACK ALLYN'S FRIENDS. By G. W. APPLETON.

LIEUTENANT BARNABAS. By FRANK BARRETT.

TWO PINCHES OF SNUFF. By WILLIAM WESTALL.

THE CONFESSIONS OF A COWARD AND COQUETTE.

By the Author of "The Parish of Hilby."

A LIFE'S MISTAKE. By Mrs. LOVETT CAMERON.

IN ONE TOWN. By E. DOWNEY.

ANCHOR WATCH YARNS. By E. DOWNEY.

ATLA. By Mrs. J. GREGORY SMITH.

LESS THAN KIN. By J. E. PANTON.

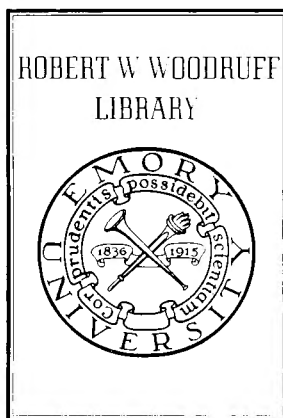
A REIGNING FAVOURITE. By ANNIE THOMAS.

THE NEW RIVER. By SOMERVILLE GIBNEY.

UNDER TWO FIG TREES. By H. FRANCIS LESTER.

COMEDIES FROM A COUNTRY SIDE. By W. OUTRAM

TRISTRAM.



3.

Iolly Bawn."

### VELS.

AMILTON AIDE.

N.

agh of Kildare.

Ward & Downey, Publishers, 12, York Street, Covent Garden.

## TWO-SHILLING NOVELS.

- DOUBLE CUNNING. By G. MANVILLE FENN.  
THE TRAGEDY OF FEATHERSTONE. By B. L.  
FARJEON.  
THE DINGY HOUSE AT KENSINGTON.  
THE OLD FACTORY. By WILLIAM WESTALL.  
RED RYVINGTON. By WILLIAM WESTALL.  
RALPH NORBRECK'S TRUST. By WM. WESTALL.  
THE CHEQUERS. By JAMES RUNCIMAN.  
CANON LUCIFER. By J. D. DELILLE.  
THAT VILLAIN ROMEO. By FITZGERALD MOLLOY.  
LOUISA. By K. S. MACQUOID.  
THE LADYE NANCYE. By "RITA."  
MERE SHAKINGS. By J. F. KEANE.  
A LUCKY YOUNG WOMAN. By F. C. PHILIPS.  
THE DEAN & HIS DAUGHTER. By F. C. PHILIPS.  
JACK AND THREE JILLS. By F. C. PHILIPS.  
AS IN A LOOKING GLASS. By F. C. PHILIPS.  
SOCIAL VICISSITUDES. By F. C. PHILIPS.  
PROPER PRIDE. By B. M. CROKER.  
PRETTY MISS NEVILLE. By B. M. CROKER.  
MISS GASCOIGNE. By Mrs. RIDDELL.  
THE PRETTIEST WOMAN IN WARSAW By  
MABEL COLLINS.  
A MAIDEN ALL FORLORN. By the Author of  
"Molly Bawn."  
HER WEEK'S AMUSEMENT. By the Author of  
"MOLLY BAWN."  
A COQUETTE'S CONQUEST. By "BASIL."  
IN A SILVER SEA. By B. L. FARJEON.  
GREAT PORTER SQUARE. By B. L. FARJEON.  
THE HOUSE OF WHITE SHADOWS. By B. L.  
FARJEON.  
GRIF. By B. L. FARJEON.  
THE LAST STAKE. By MADAME FOLI.  
SNOWBOUND AT EAGLE'S. By BRET HARTE.  
THE FLOWER OF DOOM. By M. BETHAM-EDWARDS.  
VIVA. By Mrs. FORRESTER.  
FOLLY MORRISON. By FRANK BARRETT.  
THE MYSTERY OF KILLARD. By R. DOWLING.  
THE WEIRD SISTERS. By R. DOWLING.  
HONEST DAVIE. By FRANK BARRETT.  
UNDER ST. PAUL'S. By R. DOWLING.  
THE DUKE'S SWEETHEART. By R. DOWLING.

Ward & Downey, Publishers, 12, York Street, Covent Garden.



"ALWAYS YOUNG."



"ALWAYS FAIR."

## BEETHAM'S GLYCERINE AND CUCUMBER

Is the most perfect Emollient Milk for  
**PRESERVING AND BEAUTIFYING  
THE SKIN  
EVER PRODUCED.**

It soon renders it **SOFT, SMOOTH, and WHITE** ;

Entirely removes and prevents all

**ROUGHNESS, REDNESS, SUNBURN, CHAPS, &c.,**

And preserves the Skin from the effects of the

**SUN, COLD WINDS, FROST, OR HARD WATER,**

More effectually than any other preparation

It is **INVALUABLE** at all Seasons of the Year for

Keeping the Skin Soft and Blooming

It is perfectly Harmless, and may be applied to the Tenderest Infant.

*Gentlemen will find it wonderfully soothing if applied after Shaving*

**BEWARE OF INJURIOUS IMITATIONS !**

**BEETHAM'S ' ' IS THE ONLY GENUINE**

Bottles 1s., 2s. 6d., of all Chemists and Perfumers

**SOLE MAKERS :**

**M. BEETHAM & SON, Chemists, Cheltenham.**

PRETTY MISS NEVILLE.



# PRETTY MISS NEVILLE.

BY

B. M. CROKER,

AUTHOR OF "PROPER PRIDE," "A BIRD OF PASSAGE," &c.

---

We all must follow, when Fate puts from shore.—*Byron*.

---

Sixth Edition.

LONDON:

WARD AND DOWNEY,

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.



CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,  
CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS.

# CONTENTS.

---

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—THE BURIAL . . . . .	7
II.—COUNTRY COUSINS AT HOME . . . . .	14
III.—“TIT FOR TAT” . . . . .	23
IV.—GALLOW . . . . .	31
V.—MAURICE PAYS A SECOND VISIT TO GALLOW . . . . .	37
VI.—“FOR LIFE AND DEATH” . . . . .	45
VII.—A RUN WITH THE FOXHOUNDS . . . . .	53
VIII.—MY FATE IS FIXED . . . . .	61
IX.—SURPRISING NEWS . . . . .	67
X.—“THE DEATH COACH” . . . . .	75
XI.—GRANDFATHER’S BARGAIN . . . . .	85
XII.—GOOD-BYE, GALLOW! . . . . .	101
XIII.—I SET OUT TO SEEK MY FORTUNE . . . . .	108
XIV.—ON BOARD OF THE “HINDOSTAN” . . . . .	120
XV.—A FAITHLESS FIANCÉE . . . . .	130
XVI.—THE GORGEOUS EAST . . . . .	136
XVII.—OUR NEIGHBOURS . . . . .	146
XVIII.—THE FUTURE IS FORESHADOWED . . . . .	155
XIX.—PRETTY MISS NEVILLE IS ENGAGED AT LAST . . . . .	162

CHAP.	PAGE
XX.—CAPTAIN BERESFORD'S PHOTOGRAPH	171
XXI.—CAPTAIN BERESFORD'S LETTER .	181
XXII.—CAPTAIN BERESFORD HIMSELF . .	188
XXIII.—AFTER THE BALL . . .	200
XXIV.—“LAIDE À FAIRE PEUR” .	204
XXV.—I DISTINGUISH MYSELF WITH THE MULKAPORE HOUNDS	212
XXVI.—I MAKE A PUBLIC CONFESSION .	214
XXVII.—LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM .	235
XXVIII.—I AM ADVISED TO LOCK THE STABLE DOOR	245
XXIX.—ABOUT A TIGER AND A KISS	259
XXX.—PECCAVI . . .	261
XXXI.—COLONEL KEITH'S LITTLE TEA .	267
XXXII.—HER NAME WAS LAURA	277
XXXIII.—WHEN WE TWO PARTED IN SILENCE AND TEARS	286
XXXIV.—IN UNCLE'S BLACK BOOKS .	301
XXXV.—MRS. ST. UBES BRINGS US SOME NEWS . .	309
XXXVI.—I DECLINE A DOWER . .	318
XXXVII.—MRS. VANE GIVES ME A PIECE OF HER MIND .	322
XXXVIII.—MULKAPORE RACES	327
XXXIX.—OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE	337
XL.—I AM RELEASED AT LAST	343
XLI.—I ENCOUNTER THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER, AND ENDEAVOUR TO SLAY HIM	352
XLII.—THE PROPOSAL . .	373

# PRETTY MISS NEVILLE.

---

## CHAPTER I.

### THE BURIAL.

Young barbarians all at play.—*Childe Harold.*

"MISS NORA ! Miss Nora ! your grandfather would be *real* mad if he was to see ye. Whativer are ye doing, diggin' holes in the plantation ?"

"Never you mind, Sweetlips," I answered pertly. "Don't waste your time watching us, but trot away to your dinner ; the potatoes will be cold."

I was down on my knees, ladling out the earth from a hole in front of me with both hands, and never even condescended to turn my head. "Sweetlips"—a cross-looking, elderly man, with a thin, weather-beaten face—surmounted by an equally weather-beaten, tall hat—stood surveying us for some seconds, with the strongest expression of disapproval imprinted on his crabbed, withered countenance, and then followed my advice, wheezing and muttering to himself as he hobbled down the avenue.

"Sich childer ! sich heart-scalds ! sich young divils ! Ugh ! they bate all—the plagues of Agypt was nothing to them. Ugh !——"

This indignant individual, *en route* to dinner, was grandfather's working steward and gardener, Mr. John Kelly, whom we had endowed with the name of "Sweetlips," as he was well known to be the most peevish, ill-tempered human being within the whole barony of Upper Ormond.

The heart-scalds, the young divils referred to, were three in number—Rody, Deb, and I—Nora O'Neill. We were extremely busy ; at least, Rody and I had our hands full. Deb was looking on. Deb rather shone in that capacity. We were burying a bottle containing a document.

"There, it's deep enough now," I exclaimed, jumping



up and shaking quantities of earth from the skirt of my skimpy blue cotton frock. "Read it over once more, Rody, before you bottle it up."

Rody unrolled a piece of glazed white cardboard, once the lid of a ribbon-box, and read aloud at a breathless gallop :

"We, the undersigned, do promise to meet each other, under this tree, this day ten years—July 17th, 1870.

' Signed.      RODERICK FRENCH, aged 12.  
                    DEBORA FRENCH, aged 11.  
                    NORA O'NEILL, aged 11.

"P.S.—If we are dead we won't come."

"That will do splendidly," I observed, taking it from him with an earthy hand, and reading it over carefully; "but, Rody, are you *sure* there are two m's in promise?—somehow it does not look right."

"No matter whether it's right or wrong," returned Rody confidently, "no one will see it but ourselves. Here, let's bottle it up, and have done with it. Where's the sealing-wax?"

From the depths of her pocket, Deb slowly produced a piece of candle (dip), three matches, a stick of red sealing-wax, a coloured cotton handkerchief, a pair of scissors, and about a dozen gooseberries. Having sorted these articles, we cast one last admiring glance on our treasure, rolled it neatly up in brown paper, and enclosed it in an empty porter bottle, which we corked, sealed, and buried.

"There, that is done!" I exclaimed triumphantly, as I stamped down the earth with a series of energetic jumps. "Let us hope that Sweetlips won't come rooting here! If he does find the bottle, he will be cruelly *disappointed* when he opens it, that's one comfort," I added, as I scattered twigs and handfuls of dried grass over the scene of our recent labours.

"How are we to find the place in ten years' time?" asked Deb, the matter-of-fact, with doubtful face.

"Don't you see our names cut on the tree, stupid?" retorted her brother forcibly.

Raising her eyes, she beheld a freshly-cut, lop-sided "Nora," at least five feet above her head, and a little lower

down, Rody had executed an enormous R on the glossy grey bark.

"Here," he continued, "carve your D," handing a murderous-looking clasp-knife to his sister. "Carve your letter, and the whole thing is complete."

"I can't! I hate carving! it hurts my hand," whined Debora. "Look here, Rody, it's no trouble to you, and you do it so well," in a cajoling voice. 'You carve it for me, *do!*'"

"Just like your laziness," he returned, not one whit softened by the implied compliment, and surveying his sister from head to foot, with withering contempt.

"If you want a thing done, get someone else to do it for you,' that's *your* motto."

"You will pick me a leaf of the best amber gooseberries for this, my young lady!" he concluded authoritatively, as he turned, knife in hand, and made the first deep incision in the back of the D.

"I wonder what we shall all be like this time ten years?" I remarked by way of a digression, as I stood in an easy attitude, with my hands clasped behind me, and hat on the back of my head, and watched Rody's progress with critical interest.

"Like!" cried Deb with unusual animation; "like what we are now, only taller; our faces will be the same, of course."

"It's to be hoped not, for Nora's sake," observed Rody with disconcerting candour, scooping deeper and still deeper into the bark.

"You think there is room for improvement, as far as I am concerned?" I asked with a broad grin of complacent enquiry.

"Room!" he echoed. "Oceans of room! You are a first-rater in your way—good runner, climber, and I'll back you to throw stones against any fellow I know. You ought to have been a boy. But, for a girl, you must see yourself that you are as ugly as ever you can be."

Here he paused, knife in hand, and looked at me dispassionately.

"You have red hair, my poor Miggs." Miggs was my nickname.

"Dark-red—auburn," I mildly put in.

"Red hair," he continued, as if I had not spoken ;  
"great wild-cat's eyes, a face as freckled as a turkey's egg——"

"Only tanned—not freckled," I again expostulated.

"Face like a turkey's egg," he resumed, "legs like sticks, and arms like a monkey's. Room for improvement, indeed !"

The idea tickled his fancy so much that he laughed till he was obliged to cut short his operations, and lean against the tree for support. Now, I knew I was ugly ; the fact had been dinned into my ears as long as I could remember. Still I by no means relished having the bare plain truth thus placed so nakedly before me. Colouring with annoyance, I asked rather shrilly :

"And Deb, what of her ?"

"Deb is pretty," he returned judiciously, after gravely scrutinising his sister for some seconds. "Fair hair, blue eyes ; rather lumpish figure, though, and eaten up with laziness and conceit."

"Lumpish figure !" screamed Deb ; "and what is yours, I should like to know, you hideous, shock-headed, stupid lout !"

"There, there, that will do," said Rody, waving his hand up and down in a soothing manner. "Don't excite yourself, my good girl ; keep cool."

"I'm not your good girl !" cried his sister vehemently.

"Well, then, my bad girl," he continued blandly. "Do not let us fight about our personal appearance, whatever we do. I said you were pretty, and that ought to satisfy you ; you can't expect everything. Look at Nora, who has neither face nor figure, and she does not care two straws," pointing with his knife to where I sat on the lower branch of a neighbouring beech, with my legs swaying to and fro, my arms akimbo, trying to assume an air of negligent superiority. Seeing that she still looked sulky and unappeased, he added angrily :

"I suppose you'll have the black dog on your back now for the rest of the day. I am very sorry I did not say you had a *hump*," he concluded, as he wiped his knife on the sleeve of his jacket, put it in his pocket, and prepared to depart.

Someone approaching rapidly through the underwood arrested our attention—someone gaily whistling "The

Lincolnshire Poacher." In another second a tall youth, of about eighteen, came in sight, followed by a splendid red-and-white setter.

"It's Beresford!" exclaimed Rody in a tragic whisper. "He's safe to be in an awful wax about his apple-pie bed! Come to this side of the tree, and dodge him. Pretend not to see him, and don't answer if he speaks. Keep close, and bob your heads, and make yourselves small."

But this difficult and delicate manœuvre entirely failed. It was not so easy to elude Beresford's sharp eyes; in another moment he was beside us.

"Hulloa!" he cried, looking more surprised than pleased; "this *is* an unexpected pleasure. What are you doing here, you imps? What mischief are you hatching now?"

We maintained a dignified silence, and stared at him stolidly.

"The imps deaf and dumb! What a blessing!" he ejaculated, as he surveyed us with profound amazement. For quite sixty seconds we stood confronting each other; Maurice gazing at us with undisguised contempt, and we glaring at him with all the insolent defiance at our command—which was considerable.

"Let us hope that we shall *know* each other next time we meet," said Maurice at last with ironical politeness. "On the whole, I give the palm to *you*; you are certainly the ugliest of the three," calmly addressing himself to me.

A spasmodic grin was my only reply.

"Grin away, my child—grin away; but let me give you a friendly caution. It strikes me that if your mouth grows any wider, we shall have to put your *ears* back—we shall indeed!" he added in a tone of sorrowful conviction.

Then taking off his hat with elaborate courtesy, he said:

"Babes in the wood, adieu. If you only knew what it costs me to tear myself away from you—— Oh, by-the-way"—as if struck by an after-thought—"I presume that I have to thank you for the very nice apple-pie bed I found awaiting me last night. The holly-bush in the bottom was quite an inspiration, and ought to be patented."

A deprecatory giggle from me, assures him (if further assurance were needed) that *I* had had a finger in the pie.

"Let me inform you, my young friends," he proceeded,



raising his voice, and surveying us with a pair of very angry, handsome, dark grey eyes, "that I am not going to stand this sort of thing much longer. I warn you to find some other field for your energies. There is a wearisome sameness about your jokes; I am getting a little tired of finding flour in my pockets, water in my boots, snuff among my handkerchiefs—not to speak of the whole contents of my wardrobe being scattered broadcast in all directions. If you think that you may, at all seasons, occupy your idle moments by making hay in my room, your anticipations must be immediately dispelled. I declare to you, once for all, in the most solemn manner, that the next time I am honoured by a visit I shall make a fearful example of you all three. I quite mean what I say; I am always as good as my word. Farewell." And with a nod of easy and contemptuous patronage, he turned on his heel, and pursued his way through the plantations, followed by loud peals of ironical laughter.

"How I *hate* him!" I observed a few minutes later, as I walked up the back avenue angrily kicking the fir-cones before me. "I wish he had never come here."

"Why in the world did your grandfather ask him to Gallow?" inquired Deb resentfully.

"Because he is his heir," I returned impatiently. "Gallow will belong to him some day, don't you know?"

"But he is only your grandfather's nephew, and you are his grandchild," repeated Deb—always the smartest of the three of us, and of the most inquiring mind—looking at me with an air of puzzled curiosity.

"If grandfather had a son it would go to him, but as he only had a daughter it goes to his brother's son. A *girl* could never have Gallow," I added with some dignity.

"Then what will *you* do?" inquired Rody with wide-open eyes.

"I shall have money—plenty of money," I returned with a still further accession of importance and a visible elongation of my neck.

"How do you know? How much will you have?" asked Deb with affectionate solicitude.

"I heard nurse talking it over with Miss Fluker one night when they thought I was asleep."

"And what did they say? Tell us all about it!" said

Deb, taking my arm and speaking in a low and confidential tone.

"They said," I responded, unbending, and now discoursing rapidly, and in my everyday manner, "something about entail—some law I don't understand—and that grandfather paid for Maurice's education, and allowed his mother three hundred a year; but neither he nor any of the family would know her; she was only a governess. Miss Fluker said it was an awful shame—but then, you see, she is only a governess herself."

"What fun if Maurice were to marry *her*!" cried Rody, cutting a caper. "Would not your grandfather be in a glorious rage? Miss Fluker is always making up to him, too, now that I come to think of it," nodding his head with an air of sagacious retrospection.

"No matter what *you* think"—scornfully; "Maurice is only eighteen, and Miss Fluker is—oh!—any age; and besides, horrid as he is, and detestable as he can make himself, he is ten times too good for *her*!" I cried, flinging open the garden-gate with a resounding bang, and soon we were ravaging the strawberry-beds with a zeal it would have been difficult to equal, and Maurice and his matrimonial prospects were dismissed for the present.

## CHAPTER II.

### COUNTRY COUSINS AT HOME.

Displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting,  
With most admirèd disorder.—*Macbeth.*

A FORTNIGHT previously, Maurice Beresford had arrived, to pay his first visit to grandfather and Gallow. Hearing him spoken of as a “boy,” Rody, Deb, and I looked forward to his appearance with the liveliest anticipation. In our mind’s eye, he was included in various prearranged amusements and excursions. He came! One glance was sufficient! He was not our style in the least, no more than we were *his*. He was not at all likely to be “hail-fellow-well-met” with a *possé* of mischievous children, who were boiling over with wild high spirits—impudent, reckless, uncultivated, and disorderly—who had no wish to open a book, to wear gloves or collars, or to be otherwise than young savages.

Maurice, on the contrary, read a great deal, and spent several hours daily studying in his own room—“when it was holiday-time—when he was not obliged to,” we exclaimed to each other with unmingled amazement. “He was a muff!” such was our verdict. He had not a bit of fun in him. No more idea of a joke than grandfather himself, and there was nothing Irish about him, except his eyes and his name. Yes—and his temper. He had a fine, fiery temper of his own when he was roused, and we *did* rouse him, sometimes, by loud but playful banging at his door, by many artless practical jokes (previously alluded to), by tripping him up in the dark, or by unexpectedly supplementing his morning bath by a sudden douche from some upper window.

Needless to say, we did not amalgamate; our guest scorned climbing trees, and driving the donkeys tandem—neither did his tastes lean to rat-hunts nor practical jokes.

We had long been languishing for a new victim ; and as he would not aid us as an accomplice, he seemed to be sent expressly as a "subject," and we certainly took every advantage of our opportunity.

At first he tolerated us with passable politeness, and put up with our continual society as a necessary evil ; actually tried to teach us cricket and rounders, and *manners!* suggested that I should sew a few buttons on my boots, occasionally tie up my dishevelled locks, and take to gloves ! He also treated Deb and me with a courtesy to which we were utter strangers, never pushing out of a room before us, nor helping himself first, nor appropriating our chairs as Rody too frequently did. We received his civilities with roars of laughter, but still we accepted them. This period was the calm which came before the storm. When, emboldened by success, we tried one favourite "surprise" after another, our relations with Maurice became, to say the least of it, a trifle strained.

*Never* shall I forget the first time I saw him ! It had been a very wet afternoon, and I had been prisoner in the school-room since dinner-time, with my face pasted against the windows, eagerly watching for the dog-cart. Rody came up from the Rectory, and in an evil moment inveigled me down to the yard.

The rain had ceased, but everything was soaking wet—the eaves were dripping still, likewise the trees, and all the poultry on the premises looked as if they had been bathing. Nevertheless, I suffered myself to be beguiled !

"Here's Micky Connor's mule and cart," urged my tempter. "You get in, and I'll race you with the donkey and twig as far as the cross-roads—not a soul will see you"—encouragingly.

I must here explain that "the twig" was a small basket-carriage (shaped very much like a turf-creel) that, with a swift-trotting brown donkey, brought the two Rectory children every day to Gallow to do lessons with me. They had the benefit of my English governess, Miss Fluker, and shared our early dinner, and generally remained to tea. Within the last year, Rody had been sent to school, and the basket-carriage only contributed one pupil.

To return to Rody after this long digression, I gladly and foolishly lent an ear to his suggestion. I had been



mewed up in the house all day, and was pining for a breath of fresh air. Into the wet mule-cart I got, recklessly regardless of my clean stockings and best frock; and without further persuasion started the mule at a brisk canter. Off we went, down the back avenue, I leading by quite three lengths, and keeping well in the middle of the drive, in case Rody should attempt to pass. I steered out of the gate, happy-go-lucky, and away down the road full speed, standing up in the cart like an ancient Roman charioteer, with my carroty mane fully given to the breeze. The mule was going home, or thought he was—so was the brown donkey; the race was close, and extremely exciting. Rody was gaining on me, for the road was down hill, and the twig was light. With voice and reins I encouraged the still galloping mule; the cross-roads were in sight; the victory would be mine! Would it? Almost at the goal fortune played me a cruel trick, the linch-pin came out of one of the wheels, and I was sent flying! I landed *flat* in a heap of mud that had been scraped up at the side of the road. For a moment or two I was stunned, but I was soon brought to myself by a strange voice, in a strange accent, saying:

"Little girl—it *is* a girl!"—as if there had been any doubt on the subject—"I hope you are not hurt?"

"No—o!" I stammered as I stood up and gazed vacantly around. I see the dog-cart and chestnut Kate; I see Dan the coachman, who, though well accustomed to my escapades, is hiding a smile with his white-gloved hand; I see the mule and the dilapidated cart; I see Rody; I see the twig; but can this tall youth, who has helped me up, and who is still holding my muddy hand, can this be Maurice? Of course it is.

"What in the world must he think of me?" is my next thought.

"She's not a bit hurt, she never is," put in Dan with laudable gravity.

"Who is she? Do you know where she lives?" asked the stranger benevolently.

"Who is she, is it? Sure she's your own cousin, Miss Nora O'Neill; who *else* could it be?" returned Dan with unintentional irony. Here was a pretty introduction! but I was forced to make the best of it—I pretended that I was

hurt, and assumed a slightly invalidish appearance, as, with my head on one side, I tottered towards the dog-cart, a truly humbling spectacle. I was scraped—yes, my frock was literally scraped with Rody's knife; my hands and arms were dried in my cousin's handkerchief ere I was permitted to ascend and be driven home, whilst Dan looked after my late conveyance and steed. I don't think I ever felt so small in my life as during that miserable drive. My long legs dangled down before me actually *caked* with mud, my new blue llama frock was no longer recognisable as either new or blue. Mud on my hands, my arms, my face, my hair. I should have liked to cry, to cry long, to cry copiously, but by a heroic effort I restrained my feelings. Tears would only make matters worse, if worse they could be! I had no handkerchief. I stole a glance at my companion. He was spotless—a neat dark tweed suit, irreproachably white linen, remarkably well-cut boots, remarkably good feet—the celebrated Beresford foot, instep and all—I mentally noted, as I looked at my own extremities, two shapeless masses of mud.

"How did it all happen?" he asked abruptly, kindly averting his eyes from my face; "how did you come to grief?"

"I was driving; I was upset," I muttered dolefully.

"So I saw," he returned, endeavouring to strangle a smile. "But what possessed you to drive in that fashion? Jehu the son of Nimshi was *nothing* in comparison."

"I always do," was my brief retort.

"Oh!—"

That "Oh!" spoke at least one volume of astounded disapprobation, and he and I relapsed into silence, a silence that remained unbroken until I was delivered over to the tender mercies of Miss Fluker, and hurried off to bed.

I must confess that my new acquaintance did all in his power to divert attention from me, and screened me as much as possible. He was rather nice about it, I thought, when I reviewed the whole dreadful scene, as I lay supperless in bed trying to cool my burning cheeks on my pillow.

As a rule I never took my meals downstairs. Grandfather breakfasted at eight, had no luncheon, and dined at seven. How he managed to hold out so long and not

collapse from sheer hunger, was a common topic of discussion between Deb and me. We breakfasted at nine, and were absolutely ravenous at two (our dinner-hour), and though tolerably sustained by a fair share of fruit during the afternoon, were quite ready for our tea at six o'clock.

Grandfather's breakfast-hour was altered seemingly to nine; and I was desired to appear on the scene. I descended in all the glories of a perfectly clean frock, my fiery locks tied back with a brand new ribbon. I really felt myself looking quite nice, as I marched into the breakfast-room and boldly faced grandfather and Cousin Maurice. Miss Fluker was simpering behind the teapot, and they had already commenced operations on a very tempting-looking cold raised pie, when I joined the family circle. Bold as I may have looked, I was intensely afraid of grandfather. Not to appear singular, I may add so were most people. He was a very stern-looking old gentleman, with high, aristocratic features, and snow-white hair, with whiskers and brows to match. He had a way of knitting those brows, and looking out from under them, that frightened me very much.

"So," he exclaimed, as I took a seat and wished him a timid good-morning, "so, Miss Nora, that was a nice performance of yours last evening! The next scrape you get into," here he knit his brows and looked me into the earth, "you go to school—you go to school—you go to school!"

I glanced across at Maurice, expecting to meet some signal of sympathy, to support me under this overwhelming threat; but he was calmly buttering his toast, and looking just as if grandfather had made the most commonplace observation. I watched him as he talked. He had quite a grown-up air, and seemed to have an opinion of his own on most subjects. He talked of Woolwich; spoke of it as "the shop." He was going there, and reading hard for the entrance examination. He talked of India, Russia, of war, of the probable outbreak between France and Prussia. He quite took away my breath. "He will never do for *us*," was my mental remark, repeated over and over again to myself, as I gazed at him with a vacant stare—a stare combining the impudence and impunity of eleven summers.

Nevertheless, we young people did not fail to do the honours of Gallow to the stranger. We introduced him to

the most reliable gooseberry bushes in the garden, we took him round the yard and stables, presented him to the dogs, escorted him to the Bog; gave him—oh, rare treat!—a drive in the twig; and last, but not least, took him to call on Patsey White; an old man who had once been herd on the land, and was now pensioned off, and lived at his leisure in the back lodge. To spend an afternoon with Patsey, gathered round his turf fire, roasting potatoes in the ashes, and listening to his thrilling recollections of “’98,” was to us the acmé of physical and intellectual enjoyment. The fact that Miss Flucker strongly objected to these réunions, lent an additional piquancy to the entertainment. We were never tired of listening to Patsey’s reminiscences and stories, which varied from “Vinegar Hill” to the “Siege of Troy;” with a few marvellous anecdotes of the Beresford family, thrown in as a slight interlude between the two epochs. Where he picked up his information, I know not; but he was very fond of telling us about “Throy,” as he called it, and Hector, and Ann-Dromacky, and the wooden horse; and used to enter so thoroughly into the spirit of the narrative, that he frequently led us to imagine that he had been an *eye-witness* of what he described. To this day Vinegar Hill and the plains of Troy are indissolubly associated in my mind’s eye; and Paris and Lord Edward Fitzgerald, Fair Helen, Emmett, and Ajax, stand side by side in my mental vision.

Biddy, Patsey’s granddaughter, would occasionally allow us to assist her in making a griddle-cake. Deb and I took it in turns to knead the dough in a brown crock. Oh! the rapture of handling it, and pressing it, and spreading it on a board, and rolling it, and patting it, and cutting it in four, and flouring the griddle, and laying it thereon! Maurice did not appreciate our friend Patsey; he called him “a seditious old ruffian;” and listened to the deeply interesting description of the sacking of a house, and piking of its inmates, with unconcealed indignation. Nor did his soul catch a spark of enthusiasm, when, from a nook in the chimney, a blunderbuss was produced, and proudly exhibited, as having done good service in more than one fray. On the contrary, the sight of it made Maurice absolutely furious; he threatened to smash it; told Patsey he “was a bloodthirsty old rebel, who

deserved to have his neck stretched;" told us, "we ought to be ashamed of ourselves and our taste for low company;" and flung out of the cottage in a towering passion. Deaf to Patsey's reiterated declaration, "that he only made up the stories to *please* the childer, that he was but a small gossoon when it all happened," and knew as little about the bad times as the babe unborn, that the old "goon" was only there for frightening "the crows," etc.—it was all a mere waste of time and breath; Maurice had completely shaken the dust of Patsey's dwelling off his loyal English feet, and was already nearly halfway home.

Grandfather and Maurice got on together very well. They pottered about the fields, discussing farming, young stock, stall-feds, and drainage.

"You see it is necessary for you to know something about the place, and to take an interest in what will be your own some day," remarked grandfather to Maurice in my hearing.

"Can you not leave it otherwise?" he returned, with a significant glance in my direction.

"No!" snapped grandfather, "the estate is strictly entailed."

"Could I not join you, sir, to cut off the entail? It seems more natural that your daughter's child should inherit Gallow, than your brother's son."

"You are a most *disinterested* young gentleman," said grandfather, with an unconcealed sneer. "You are ready to beggar yourself, are you?" eyeing his nephew with contemptuous incredulity.

"No, not exactly," rejoined Maurice, reddening. "I mean—that is to say"—he stammered. Then suddenly taking his courage in both hands, he blurted out: "You could make over Gallow to your granddaughter, and give me a sum of money to start me in my profession. I am not cut out for a country gentleman," he added in a low tone.

"Stuff! nonsense! rubbish!" exclaimed grandfather angrily, emphasising each word with his walking-stick in such a manner as to raise a cloud of dust out of the carpet, and send Snap into a distant retreat under the sofa. "When a man inherits a thousand acres, rent free, he finds no

difficulty in playing the part of owner; the estate is strictly entailed, and must go to you, whether you like it or *not*. There has been a Beresford of Gallow for the last three hundred years, and I hope there will be one for three hundred more. As to Nora, she is amply provided for, so you need have no scruples on that head."

"But I have chosen the Army as a profession, and I mean to stick to it," returned Maurice, with a pertinacity for which I would not have given him credit. "I have always made up my mind to be a soldier, ever since I was a small boy."

"Just so," replied grandfather, nodding his head, "there's nothing uncommon in *that*. We all know that half a man's life is often spent in wanting to put on the red coat, and the other half in wishing to take it off. Many a Beresford has had the same taste; it's all very well when you are young and want to see the world. How old are you?"

"Nearly eighteen," responded Maurice, with ill-disguised pride.

"Ah well, I give you just ten years' soldiering, and you see if you won't be pretty sick of it at the end of that time, and only too glad to turn your sword into a ploughshare and come and settle down at Gallow!"

Here I sneezed violently, and grandfather, who had wholly forgotten my presence, looked sharply round, by no means too well pleased to find that I had "assisted" at the interview, and harshly ordered me to leave the room, which I did, effecting my retirement with all the dignity I could muster.

Grandfather liked Maurice—he talked to him, and made much more of him than anyone I ever saw in his company. I think the reason of this was that Maurice, although perfectly respectful always, was not one whit afraid of him, nor in the least discomfited by any of the rude, sarcastic speeches that his uncle used to scatter broadcast.

Grandfather was a soured and disappointed man. The loss of his wife, a year or two after her marriage, was a blow he never recovered. The elopement of his only child—my mother—was another of Misfortune's heaviest strokes. From this latter he never rallied; cut himself loose from all society, and shut himself up among his own farms and

fields, almost as much isolated from his former circle of friends and acquaintances as if he had taken ship for another country. Now that I look back on it, I do not think that Maurice had a particularly pleasant time of it that summer at Gallow. Walking and talking with an irritable, caustic old gentleman, and being tormented to the verge of insanity by three lively and inventive young people, filled up the best part of his day—reading for his Woolwich examination being a kind of light distraction and relaxation. He had no congenial companions, no boating, riding, or rackets—no amusements of any sort or description. Considering all things, he bore himself well—was respectful and attentive to grandfather, amiable and polite to Miss Fluker, and kept his temper in an astonishing manner as far as we were concerned. I think he discovered that nothing cut us up so much, or disappointed us so keenly, as his passing over our jokes with disdainful silence—ignoring them and us completely, and accepting many startling disclosures with matchless self-control.

## CHAPTER III.

### "TIT FOR TAT."

It would be argument for a week, laughter for a month, and a good jest for ever.—*Henry IV*

SHORTLY before Maurice left, we had the satisfaction of seeing him in a towering passion.

The river Slate ran through a part of Gallow, between two mills. At times it was very high, at others quite low, according as the mills were working and carried off the water. When the upper mill was in full play, there was a kind of current, or mill race, very strong, rapid, and dangerous. We three "imps," as Maurice usually called us, owned a large flat-bottomed boat, which we kept in a kind of harbour, fastened by a lock and chain. We were quite expert in rowing about the river, but our operations were confined to the space between the mills, about a mile in length.

Here the Slate was very pretty, bounded on one side by the woods of Gallow, and on the other by large flat fields edged with alders and bulrushes. One evening we had just landed, and were locking up the boat, when who should we descry approaching but Miss Fluker and Maurice, the former with a handkerchief tied over her head, the skirt of her dress gracefully elevated, stepping high through the grass.

"How much I should like a row this lovely evening!" she remarked, looking pensively at her companion with her head on one side.

"I'm afraid to trust myself with these children," she added frankly. "I wish *you* would take me out, Mr. Beresford; it would be *such* a treat," rolling her eyes rapturously.

"All right," he replied promptly, proceeding to unlock the boat and hand her in. In she stepped, simpering, and



smiling, and making a great fuss about her petticoats—she was exceedingly vain of her feet and ankles. Having sufficiently displayed them, she took a seat.

“Now then, shove off,” cried Maurice, as he opened the gate of the boathouse and pushed her out by leaning his hands against either gatepost. “Shove off,” he repeated. We shoved with a will, all three, and sent them with united might and main out into mid-current, *without any oars*. At first Maurice could hardly realise his position; but when he had grasped it, he shouted to us to “float them off after him.”

A likely thing! What fun it was! What a state Flukey was in! We enjoyed the whole scene with unaffected delight, as we ran along the bank, and kept up with them, capering with ecstasy.

The current carried them onward very quickly for quite half a mile, and there the two sat in the boat impotent and powerless.

Maurice's face alone was a study that would have richly repaid a two-mile walk; and Flukey's little screams and squeals were quite too awfully funny.

At length they were borne in close to the bank, and Maurice, by grasping a branch, managed to stop the boat somehow, till he and Miss Fluker were both on *terra firma*. They were dripping when we met them, and *very* angry. Miss Fluker's indignation was of the high and haughty kind which scorned words. But Maurice was furious; he spoke his mind for once, he gave us his candid opinion of us there and then—no delicate innuendoes, no beating about the bush.

“The next time I catch you playing off any of your pretty little tricks I will pay you out for certain.” He dis-couraged to us from this text for nearly five minutes, and then escorted Miss Fluker home in search of dry garments; but the warmth of their indignation was of itself amply sufficient to have superseded any fire.

A few days after this “outrage,” as Flukey called it, we were caught red-handed in the very act of putting eggs in the pocket of Maurice's light overcoat, which in an un-guarded moment he had left hanging in the hall.

Seizing my wrist, and eyeing me for a moment in speechless disgust, he said, “Very well, very nice indeed,”

removing the eggs. "You are three delightful young people, and I am exceedingly fond of you. Wait, my little dears. One good turn deserves another, and I *think* I will be able to show you a trick worth two of yours." So saying, he strode away with his coat over his arm, leaving us grinning foolishly at each other, and feeling checkmated for once. He was quite as good, if not better than his word; he kept his promise nobly, as you shall hear.

A week later was the half-yearly fair in Kilcool, the village nearest to Gallow, a day of the greatest importance in our estimation. We had always a whole holiday on the occasion, and all our pocket-money was hoarded up for at least two months previously, to be laid out in fairings. After much discussion we had made up our minds to invest in a joint-stock *pig*, to be fed and fattened (at grandfather's expense), and sold for our mutual benefit.

Between us, we mustered twenty-one shillings and five-pence-halfpenny, fifteen of which we intended to lay out on the pig, the remainder on gingerbread, squibs, and fishing-tackle.

The morning came at last, bringing Deb and Rody to Gallow, almost at break of day.

We counted over our hoard once more, and made detailed arrangements for spending a long and happy holiday. Swallowing our breakfast hastily, we hurried down to the yard, where the donkey and twig were awaiting us.

Maurice was standing at the back-door, looking rather knowing and whistling as usual. We had been on excellent terms for the last few days.

"What a hurry you are in, young people!" he said, with an air of cheerful remonstrance. "If you have a moment to spare, you will see something in the long loft that will surprise you more than anything you'll see at the fair."

"What is it?" we asked eagerly; "is it pups?"

"Go and see for yourselves," he replied, turning away nonchalantly.

"It won't take a second," I exclaimed, my curiosity aroused, nimbly springing out of the twig, and flying up the long ladder like a lamplighter, closely followed by Rody and Deb.

We entered the great loft, which ran the whole length of the stables and coach-house, scoured round at full speed, looked into all the familiar nooks and corners—and saw *nothing*.

We returned rapidly to the open doorway, and found Maurice standing below, with one hand on the ladder and a smile on his face.

“Well?” he exclaimed, opening his eyes very wide.

“We saw nothing,” we returned angrily; “you have made a fool of us. There was nothing to see, much less to surprise us.”

“Does not *this* surprise you?” he rejoined, calmly removing the ladder.

“Oh, nonsense! Come, put it back at once. We shall be late for the fair as it is!” cried Rody imperatively.

“I think it more than likely,” said Maurice composedly, pushing the ladder still farther and farther as he spoke.

“You don’t mean to say you are going to keep us up here?” I screamed furiously.

A smiling nod was my only reply.

“Here, Dan! Dan!” I shrieked, “bring back the ladder; let us down at once; do you hear me, Dan?”

But Dan, who had been critically surveying us, as he stood in the middle of the yard polishing a bit, now bolted into the harness-room, from which region his vulgar loud guffaws ascended to our indignant ears.

Meanwhile Maurice had sent away the twig, and seating himself on a wheelbarrow, with his arms crossed, and his hat on the back of his head, surveyed us with an expression of the liveliest satisfaction.

It was in vain we threatened, coaxed, raged, or pleaded. He maintained an exasperating, smiling silence, and seemed thoroughly to enjoy his hideous revenge.

Having made us the laughing-stock of the entire premises, he rose—to get the ladder, we fondly imagined; no such thing, but to take his leave, and to heap insult upon injury. With hat in hand, and an elaborately deferential air, he accosted us.

“Could he do anything for us in Kilcool? He would be most happy to undertake any commissions. Considering the short time he had been in Ireland, he was not a bad judge of *pigs*”—with a meaning glance at us. “Would we

put ourselves in his hands? Would we like a white pig, or a black pig, or a spotted specimen? And how about the gingerbread and peppermint? Or would we let the pig and peppermint stand over till some future occasion?"

These empty civilities were responded to by frightful grimaces on our side. Having worked us up into a delirium of passion, he left the yard, with many bows and wreathed smiles, and backward looks; we following him, with all the names and execrations our vocabulary could command—till his figure was lost to sight round a turn in the avenue.

Everyone had gone to the fair apparently, excepting ourselves. The yard was empty, save for Sweetlips, who passed through more than once, for the evident purpose of jeering at us, and enjoying our discomfiture. The three of us, seated disconsolately in the loft doorway, with our legs limply dangling down, the very picture of impotent rage and misery, was a sight that undoubtedly pleased him not a little.

"*Dear* Sweetlips, let us down," we deigned to say, "and we will give you half-a-crown."

"I'd rather see yez up there than twinty half-crowns!" rejoined the old savage grimly.

In vain we raised our offer to five shillings, to seven-and-sixpence—he was deaf to every bribe; and compliments of the most fulsome nature, on his personal appearance, his son's personal appearance, his dog's personal appearance, equally failed to soften him. He vouchsafed no reply, merely observing each time he passed us, "It sarves ye right! It sarves ye right!" accompanying the remark with a malevolent grin.

Time crawled on—twelve o'clock came—one o'clock! We had breakfasted hastily, as I before remarked, and the pangs of hunger began to assail us. Half-past one—two! Unable to sustain the combined affliction of famine and disappointment, Deb and I dissolved in tears. We cried unremittingly for half an hour. We wept till three o'clock was striking, and then, though half-blinded with crying, we descried Maurice leisurely returning by the back entrance, whistling, "Willie, we have missed you." He approached us and addressed us as follows:

"My beloved young friends, I am now going to release you on one condition."

"What is that?" we asked in a breath.

"That you will give me your solemn word of honour to give up playing practical jokes."

"We will," returned Deb and I hysterically.

"On your honour, Deborah and Norah?"

"Honour bright," we answered meekly.

"But *I* won't promise anything of the sort," put in Rody defiantly, squaring himself in the doorway. "You are a mean, miserable sneak, and I hate you, and I only wish I was big enough to thrash you."

"I am sorry to hear you have such a bad opinion of me," returned Maurice blandly, "and I have no doubt that a slight irritation of the cuticle, to put it in polite language, would do *you* a world of good."

Addressing himself to Deb and me, he proceeded:

"I deeply regret that I am unable to release any of you till you have *all* given me the same promise."

As he concluded this remark he turned away.

"Don't go! oh, don't go!" shrieked Deb and I simultaneously, goaded to desperation by the prospect of his departure, and the stimulating effects of hunger.

"All right, I'll wait five minutes," he replied, once more taking a seat on the wheelbarrow, opening a cigar-case, and surveying us with an air of triumphant content.

Deb and I meanwhile seized this short respite with avidity, and flung ourselves metaphorically at Rody's feet, and implored and besought him to yield. Partly moved by our agonised entreaties, but chiefly by the pangs of raging hunger, he relented, and three minutes later saw us ravening in the larder, where a certain amount of cold meat and potatoes, and the best part of a bogberry tart, had been put aside for us by Maurice's orders.

Half an hour afterwards we were in Kilcool; but the best of the day, the cream of the fair, was over—skimmed.

Many were the inquiries as to "where we had been, and what had detained us?" accompanied by various significant, knowing looks, that told too plainly that Maurice's outrageous "joke" was known far and wide. It turned out that he had deliberately plotted and planned the whole scheme, and we, thanks to our curiosity, had fallen an only too easy prey to his vengeance. He had grandfather's full sympathy and entire permission to do

with us as he pleased, for he agreed with his nephew in thinking that it was quite time to read us a lesson out of our own book.

Two days later Maurice left Gallow; our intercourse with him during these two days we marked by a sense of our high displeasure—putting him in "Coventry," as far as our entertaining conversation and delightful society extended. We did not deign to bid him farewell, nor did he ascend to make his adieux; but as our school-room overlooked the hall door we were enabled personally to superintend his departure. We took the deepest interest in the matter, leaning half our bodies out of the window; we saw him take a very cordial leave of grandfather and Miss Fluker, and step into the dog-cart. Ere he was whirled away, his eye caught sight of *us*, with our necks craned forth, and our faces radiant with malicious elation. Lifting his hat with a courtesy that was ironical in its humble deference, and lightly kissing his hand to Deb and me, he was bowled away down the avenue and soon lost to sight.

Need I say that we witnessed his departure without any poignant regret? I drew my head back into the school-room with a deep sigh of relief, and warmly agreed with Deb and Rody in thinking that "Maurice's room was far better than his company." We abused him roundly, till Miss Fluker's entrance closed the conversation, and we returned to our lessons with a horrible, but unspoken conviction, that the late guest of Gallow had been more than a match for us, and had beaten us with our own weapons.

We discovered that Maurice had made himself quite a favourite with the rest of the household. Grandfather, Miss Fluker, and Mr. French each sounded his praises in their own way; we, meanwhile, secretly exchanging signs, and nudges, and glances, of contemptuous derision. It turned out that he was popular abroad as well as at home, for he and Carlo the setter used to take long walks in the neighbourhood and over the bog, which lay behind Gallow; and he had made himself known and liked within a much wider radius than we had ever suspected. The country people, taken by his appearance, his affability, and his agility in leaping bog-drains, voted Mr. Beresford "a

splendid young gentleman ;” and even Sweetlips, who never had anything good to say for man or beast, with the notable exception of grandfather’s dog Snap — an ill-favoured, irritable terrier, whom he declared to be “aqual, if not *supairior*, to a Christian”—even Sweetlips allowed, that Mr. Maurice Beresford “was a dacent, quiet boy.”

## CHAPTER IV

GALLOW.

So sleeps the pride of former days, so glory's thrill is o'er.  
*Scott.*

GALLOW was a large, shapeless, old, red brick mansion, sufficiently imposing in its way, and known by the name of "The House" within a very considerable radius; it stood in the middle of a large demesne, and had little or no view beyond its own undulating grounds, and—enlivening prospect!—the family burying-place, which was within a moat or rath halfway up the avenue, surrounding a ruined chapel, and formed the only picturesque feature in the landscape.

Judging from the tombstones, we had a very respectable show of ancestors—ancestors of whom grandfather, despite his shabby old clothes, cynicism, and distaste for society, was not a little proud. Tradition handed down many stirring tales of their exploits; it even led us to believe that they had fought at the siege of Acre, and under the walls of Ascalon; and it is almost needless to mention that they came over with the Conqueror. By the way, *his* followers must have been like the sands of the sea in multitude. Personally, I did not care two straws for pedigree, and infinitely preferred a flourishing and fertile gooseberry-bush to the fine wide-spreading genealogical-tree that made grandfather's heart glow with family pride every time he lifted his eyes above the library chimney-piece.

We had long ceased to keep up state of any kind at Gallow; no hounds were in the kennels, no hunters in the stalls; no dashing coach-and-four swept round from the great yard; our glory had departed. "Ichabod" might be written on our big, rusty, seldom-opened entrance-gates. The estate was partly let and partly farmed. The farming



element predominated, and grandfather made large sums of money by the sale of stall-fed cattle and promising young horses. The retinue indoors was but small. "Big" and "Little" Mary were respectively cook and housemaid, and a venerable servant-man, chief seneschal, and butler. Never very smart at the best of times, our pranks had reduced him to a state of mind bordering on imbecility. Thanks to *us*, he had a lively distrust of every dish-cover, plate, or decanter he took into his hands, as he never knew where, or how, a lurking explosive might be concealed!

I think I have mentioned all the inmates of Gallow, with the exception of Miss Fluker, my governess. She was a thin, upright, angular lady (whose age baffled all speculation), with an opaque complexion, pale, furtive, greenish eyes, and quantities of dull-looking sandy hair; a well-cut nose, and large white teeth, resembling the keys of a piano, were her strong points. Very thin lips and an exceedingly retreating forehead detracted considerably from her appearance, which, however, was passable, not to say "genteel." According to the servants she had *two* faces, and two distinct characters from our point of view. Downstairs, with grandfather and with the world at large, she was an angel. Upstairs, alone with us, she was exactly the reverse. Downstairs, she was the anxious hard-working instructress, whose pupils' advancement was her only aim and care, most tenderly solicitous about grandfather's health and appetite, hanging on his words, however gruff, and flattering him in a manner that was palpable even to our not very sensitive perception.

She was a past mistress in the art, and knew his little weaknesses only too well. He considered himself the best judge of a horse in the province of Munster, and the most weatherwise man in the kingdom! To his family pride she also administered delicate and judicious doses of the same specific, but here she only spoke in a wide and general way. He allowed no profane finger to meddle with his all but sacred pedigree. The Beresfords were a people apart; a race in themselves; *not* to be confounded with common humanity. I am not sure that he did not entertain the idea that they had a boat of their own at the time of the Flood.

Upstairs, our governess was at no pains to conceal her ungovernable temper, nor her all-consuming laziness and

incapacity. Her one talent was music. She played splendidly, in a hard, cold, showy style ; and, thanks to hours of practice and a lively fear of Miss Fluker's heavy ruler, I was an excellent pianist for my years. But our French was a farce—ditto our sums. With great difficulty I advanced as far as the rule of three in arithmetic, and there I stuck fast, for the very good reason that my governess did the same. At two o'clock we were set free, let loose ; and the remainder of the day was our own. Miss Fluker would spend hours on the sofa, deeply absorbed in a novel, and according to the time of year, and as her delicate appetite suggested, we would place beside her a plate of apples, roasted chestnuts, strawberries, or plums, so that she was enabled to feed body and mind at one and the same time ; or, sometimes, arrayed in a scarlet cloak and coquettish little black hat, she would walk down to Kilcool and visit her friends in that direction, and enliven them with the latest news from the " big " house.

Mr. French, our Rector, was the only outsider admitted to grandfather's confidence, and Gallow. He was a wiry, elderly gentleman, with a sharp nose, ruddy complexion, mild, benign, blue eyes, and grey mutton-chop whiskers. In moments of intellectual embarrassment, he had an odd habit of convulsively clutching one of these ornaments, and endeavouring to draw it into his mouth. He preached extempore sermons, of length varying from fifty to seventy-five minutes, to a large and appreciative congregation of stanch Protestants, descended from Huguenot settlers, and when suddenly stranded for a word, the above-mentioned manœuvre invariably gave him instant relief.

Sweetlips was his clerk, and answered the responses in a loud, aggressive brogue, keeping his eye steadily upon us between whiles. I am sure he thought this just as much a part of his duty as handing round the poor-box—an article closely resembling a large brass warming-pan, into the depths of which each penny sank with a loud resounding clang. Even Mr. French himself was not exempt from contribution. When all had given their mite, the long-handled receptacle was held up expectantly to the pulpit, and Mr. French's fourpenny bit tinkled genteely down among the coppers. Then Sweetlips, his task fulfilled, would shut himself into his desk (along with the collection), and the sermon commenced.

He gave his ears to the discourse above him—to Mr. French's rounded periods, his stentorian questions, his occasional shouts, and his frequent cushion-thumping—but his eyes were entirely at *our* service.

The long, doctrinal discourse was trying pastime to Rody, Deb, and me. Even the eye of our pastor himself was at times insufficient to restrain us, and from our deep, square pew hysterical snorts, and strangled, choking laughter, have more than once been heard—ay, even in the pulpit itself. On these occasions, Mr. French would pause, and paralyse us with a look, and then resume his discourse, leaving us in a comatose condition. Not that we feared *him*. Grandfather was our *bête noire*. Be assured that, when *he* was present, our conduct was unexceptional.

Within half a mile of Gallow was the village of Kilcool. It boasted a church, chapel, post-office, and weekly market. There were several shops, where you could suit yourself with frieze, calico, corduroy, bacon, red herrings, and tallow candles.

On Monday—market-day—the one long street was thronged with carts of turf, asses' cars, farmers riding wild, shaggy-looking, long-tailed colts, and tribes of country women in their dark blue cloaks, driving hard bargains for eggs, and butter, and fowls. The various gentry of the neighbourhood—few and far between—might also be seen doing their weekly marketing, and exchanging morsels of local news.

On other days Kilcool was empty. The "Deserted Village" might have been its name. A passing jaunting car was an event that brought everyone to their doors and windows. Outside the police barrack, a solitary policeman basked in the sun; he would have the street to himself for hours. Even a horse going to the forge, or the Gallow postboy, was an object of general interest.

This being the case, you can easily imagine the sensation that Rody created by walking down the village one sleepy Sunday afternoon, got up in the full costume of a first-class Chinese mandarin!

He really looked magnificent. The red satin petticoat added greatly to his height, as did also the round black cap, to which his pigtail was attached. His gorgeously embroidered wide-sleeved coat shone with a perfect blaze of

splendour in the bright glare of the afternoon sun. A carefully gummed black moustache, and an enormous white umbrella, completed his personation.

As he went slowly and solemnly down the street, muttering some gibberish intended to represent Chinese, it is not too much to say, that his own father did not know him.

Mr. French had been reading to a sick parishioner in Kilcool, and was in the act of leaving the house, when his eye was caught by a vision of the celestial, pacing sedately down the street, followed by an immense crowd, that had sprung up as if by magic. Market-day was nothing to that Sunday afternoon. He was too stupefied with amazement to move for some seconds.

Then suddenly accosting the Chinese, who was leisurely stalking past, said :

“ Who are you, my good man ? ”

Great gesticulation and dumb-show on the part of foreigner.

“ We allow no play-actors on Sundays; what are you doing here ? ” reiterated Mr. French authoritatively, speaking from the steps, with his Bible under one arm and his umbrella under the other.

“ Chee-Chee-a hi ga. How much a hi ga ? ” returned the celestial with unabashed mien.

“ Rody ! ” thundered his father, pouncing on him. “ Alas, alas, Rody, the brogue has betrayed you ! ”

Over the conclusion of this scene I draw a veil.

Deb and I, who had followed in the crowd, fled home, and dissembled perfect ignorance of the whole affair. But we did not escape unpunished. It was discovered that I had lent the costume to Rody. I routed it out from among a quantity of old family brocades and dresses that were stowed away in a large wardrobe in one of the spare rooms. It had been given to one of the Beresfords by a friend in the diplomatic service, and was said to be worth at least one hundred pounds; this was its first and last appearance in Kilcool. The wardrobe and its contents were securely locked up for the future. The penalty I paid for my share in the transaction was a severe one: I was cruelly deprived of sugar in my tea, and butter on my bread, for the space of one week.

The country round Gallow was very quiet in every way. We had few neighbours, and even from those few, grandfather held aloof. He never mixed in society since my mother, Nora Beresford, made a runaway match with the curate of Kilcool. It was said that grandfather idolised her, and would hardly have thought a duke above her merits. He indulged her in every way, and gratified her slightest whim; but when she announced her intention of marrying Mr. O'Neill, the curate, for once he was firm, and said, "If she married O'Neill, he would never see her again; she must choose between them."

She carried her point all the same.

One morning she was missing, and the inevitable letter was found on her pincushion, informing grandfather that she had elected to become Mrs. O'Neill, and hoped he would forgive her—a vain hope.

My father found an incumbency near Liverpool; I have heard that he was clever and eloquent, and greatly liked wherever he went. Within two years, he fell a victim to a virulent fever, caught among the stifling alleys and back courts of his parish. My mother shortly followed him, carried off by the same epidemic, and I was left an orphan ere I was a year old.

Grandfather sent for me and adopted me, and thus Gallow had become the only home I had ever known.

So much for my history; now, to relate Maurice's as briefly as possible.

He was the only child of grandfather's step-brother, a commander in the Navy, and years younger than himself. He had married a pretty governess, to the unspeakable indignation of the whole Beresford connection. He was drowned by the sudden capsizing of a boat in a squall somewhere off the Mauritius, leaving his widow and son to the benevolence of his relations and to the enjoyment of a small pension. The benevolence of his relatives was represented by grandfather's allowance of three hundred pounds a year, paid quarterly and in advance; otherwise, he steadily ignored the existence of his brother's widow. "That woman," as he called her, lived a very quiet inoffensive life, in the neighbourhood of a small seaport, and devoted herself entirely to the care (not to say worship) of her only child, my cousin Maurice.

## CHAPTER V

### MAURICE PAYS A SECOND VISIT TO GALLOW.

Moments make the year and trifles life.—*Young.*

Two years had passed since "Mandarin Sunday," as we called that Sabbath, on which Rody was unmasked, and disgraced, before the entire population of Kilcool, and during those two years, there had been some changes even at Gallow, where one day was the exact reflection of another. Time had told more upon the inmates than on the place itself, though there was a greater quantity of rust on the massive front gates, and moss on the avenue, than of yore. The library carpet and curtains were perceptibly dimmer and more faded-looking, and the great long corridors, and empty shuttered rooms, seemed drearier and gloomier than ever. Grandfather had aged a good deal; he was more silent, and lived, if it were possible, more to himself than formerly. Public rumour (which was occasionally wafted in our direction) declared that he was saving quantities of money, and public rumour for once may have been accurate. He spent most of his time over his old brass-bound bureau, adding up figures, making entries in account-books, studying share-lists, and writing letters, and he had become what the servants called very "near." I was changed too; I was now nearly fourteen, though very young for my age,—as gawky and long-legged as ever, it is true, but my frocks now reached down to the tops of my boots, and my copper-coloured locks were confined in one thick plait like Rody's pigtail. Sometimes I viewed myself anxiously in the old spotted mirror, that stood between the windows of the almost empty drawing-room.

"Was I so *very* ugly?" I asked myself over and over again. I wished I knew. Deb and Rody entertained no doubt whatever on the subject,—and they made me heartily

welcome to their candid opinion. As a rule I agreed with them, after a critical inventory of my sharpened features, tawny locks, and sunburnt skin; and I would wander away with a heavy sigh and wish I were like my mother, whose half-length portrait in oils hung above the mantelpiece. She must have been lovely, judging by her picture—a slender, elegant-looking girl in a white diaphanous dress, with arch dark eyes, and a profusion of curly hair. “If I were only as pretty as Deb, I would be satisfied,” I would mutter to myself. She was as well favoured as of yore, and quite the young lady now, in her neat winter dress, fur coat, and felt hat. I was never well dressed, but always looked a romp and a hoyden, in my battered blue serge, miles too short in the sleeves, and too tight in the skirt. Occasionally Miss Fluker would hint at the scantiness of my wardrobe, and wring a few pounds from grandfather, in spite of his angry expostulations that “it was sheer waste of money. I would do very well as I was. What did I want with dress?” and that “she was only putting extravagant ideas into my head.” Nevertheless, Miss Fluker generally carried her point, and bore away a cheque for a small amount, to be spent on my adornment. Grandfather never seemed to feel parting with a cheque as acutely as hard, visible coin of the realm; *that* to him was almost unendurable; and Saturday afternoon, when he paid the men, was by no means one of his happiest hours.

Deb was much improved in every way; various visits to her grandmother in Dublin had worked a distinctly perceptible change in her mind and manners. She now acted as a curb instead of a spur to me, and people could no longer say with regard to our pranks that “Miss Deb *made* the bullets and Miss Nora *fired* them.” Rody was as ugly, as active, and as mischievous as ever; a clever but idle boy at school, and the professional fool of the establishment. Maurice’s battery was quartered in Dublin; he had become a real live artillery officer, and had more than once been invited down to Gallow, but as yet he had not made his appearance. I fancy that his recollections of his last visit were still too fresh in his memory, and that he had no consuming desire to renew his acquaintance with *us*. I had long soared above donkeys, and now possessed a steed of my own, one of the young horses bred on the place, who

turned out to be too small for a hunter, and was presented to me by grandfather in a fit of unwonted generosity. I had always had what the country people called "an element" for riding, and I now spent three or four hours in the saddle every day, to the great satisfaction of myself, if not of Freney; but I am sure he preferred careering about the fields, with a light weight on his back, to spending his time in a dark stable, like grandfather's fat cob.

Escorted by Dan, I went all the household messages. To Kilcool, to the post, to the railway station, for parcels; to the canal-boat stores, to the limekiln, etc.

During my peregrinations, I rarely ever met a single creature, but that did not trouble me much—the mere fact of being on horseback was ample pleasure for me. I tested Freney's powers to the utmost, being extremely fond of jumping and schooling. There was scarcely a hurdle, bank, or gripe about the place that we had not been over dozens of times. Dan did not shine in the saddle; he was by no means partial to "lepping" as he called it, and was frequently pounded by me, coming home from Kilcool by the short cut.

I would say, "Come along, Dan; give Kate her head, she'll jump it beautifully. Follow me."

And he would have no shame whatever in replying, "Bedad, miss, I'd be afeard! if ye don't mind, I'll just trot round," and "trot round" he did. When Rody was at home for his holidays, I had an escort more of my own way of thinking. Mounted on some raw four-year-old, borrowed from a farmer, he would call for me every afternoon, and together we would prick forth in quest of "leps" and adventures.

I can honestly say, that within a radius of five miles, we knew every field in the country, and most fences. The farmers vowed "that it was mainly alarming" to see the way we rode.

"Faix, they'll break their necks, and no loss if they do," I heard Sweetlips mutter, as he watched us amusing ourselves over a low white gate that led into the haggard. His amiable prophecy was never fulfilled; but I shudder now when I think of the awful places that in those days we used to go over just merely for fun.

It was a common thing for Rody to say, "Come along,



Nora, let us take a turn at Kelly's ditch before we go home." Kelly's ditch was an enormous boundary-drain, the terror of the Darefield Hunt, viz., a tall, awkward, crumbling bank, with a vast yawner on either side.

Indisputably it was a place, to quote Dan, "that the more you looked at it the worse you liked it."

Fortunately Rody and I were light weights, and never came to any signal grief. We had a few mishaps, but nothing serious. Once I staked Freney, jumping into a plantation, but not badly; and once or twice he came down, owing to a bad taking off, or landing. Rody's falls were too numerous to mention: I have seen him get three in the same afternoon; but he was never a bit the worse, nor his horse either.

There is a great deal of truth in the good old Irish motto, "Where there's no fear, there's no danger;" and certainly we never dreamt of either one or the other. Sometimes we would take what we called a "bee line" across country, and pretend we were hunting, racing each other for some particular goal, and taking everything before us, with dauntless courage and grim determination.

How I did enjoy tearing through the fields in the thin, chill, autumn air! The thud of our horses' hoofs, and our exclamations and laughter, being the only sounds that broke the deep stillness of the very heart of the country.

At Christmas we had an unexpected visit from Maurice. I fancy grandfather and Miss Flucker kept us purposely in ignorance of his probable arrival, not unnaturally fearing that we might, in *our* turn, prepare some startling but well-matured "surprise" for the coming guest.

Rody, Deb, and I were gathered round a fine fire in the steward's room, roasting apples, in the dim "do-nothing" hour that preceded dinner. With scorched and heated faces, we were just preparing to reap the reward of our labours, when the door was suddenly flung open and Maurice walked in.

Even to our prejudiced eyes, he was extremely good-looking, as he approached and stood in the full light of the fire. He looked taller and more manly since we had last seen him, and bore himself as one who was quite assured of his welcome. The freezing one we accorded him ought to have gone a long way towards reducing the heat of the room.

"Good evening, young people," he said cheerfully, taking a chair and drawing up between Deb and me. "Eating as usual I see," he continued as he glanced round our little circle.

We received this rude remark with a stony stare.

"Well, and how have you been since I last had the pleasure of seeing you?" spreading out his hands towards the blaze, and looking us over attentively. "Pretty frisky, eh? As I was coming down the passage I thought I was about to enter the Tower of Babel, but I find that I have stumbled upon three Trappists instead."

"We did not expect you," responded Deb politely; "can you wonder that your sudden appearance should have struck us dumb?"

"Ah, yes, of course; very true!" he nodded affably. "But where is your Irish hospitality?" he proceeded. "I do not see you forcing any of your dainties on me, and I am starving!" calmly reaching forth a long arm and appropriating a well-roasted apple from the plate on the fender.

We exchange glances of amazement, and help ourselves precipitately to the remainder, save one (the smallest), which we leave for manners or Maurice.

"Why are you all so quiet?" he asked, looking curiously around. "What change has come o'er the spirit of your dream? Where are the delicate witticisms of which I retain such a pleasing recollection?"

By this time we had completely rallied from the first surprise. We were not going to let him have it *all* his own way.

"We *had* a rich vein of humour, had we not?" I retorted. "We have allowed it to lie fallow latterly, but we are still capable of amusing ourselves—*if* we get a chance"—significantly.

"No doubt!" he returned drily, stooping to pick up the last apple. "Talking of amusements, have you been to the fair of Kilcool lately?" he asked in a tone of pleasant banter and with a glance of quick, ironical interrogation.

"It's none of your business, whether we have or not!" replied Rody with a rudeness bordering on ferocity.

"When did you arrive?" put in Deb in her mild, level voice, anxious to avert a scene.

"About an hour ago. Did you know that I was expected, or is it an agreeable surprise?"

"Can you *ask* it?" I answered impressively. "Don't you think that we should have met you at the station; to say nothing of having bonfires at both sides of the avenue, and the whole front of the house illuminated?"

"True!" he replied carelessly. "You can rectify the matter by having an enthusiastic demonstration when I am going away."

"And when may that be?" I asked bluntly.

"Tibb's eve," here rejoined, with inconceivable promptitude.

"He is getting *quite* witty, I declare!" I remarked to Rody across my cousin, with a patronising smile.

"They have smartened him up in the artillery, have they not?" observed Deb, just as if Maurice were miles away.

"So, so!" returned Rody with raised brows and a protruding under-lip, "he certainly *is* improved, and his moustache is now visible to the *naked* eye! But you know, you could not expect them to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear!"

"I know what I'll make of one of *yours*, Master Rody," cried Maurice. Jumping up and seizing him by the lobe of a sufficiently prominent organ, he compelled him to make several unwilling gyrations round the room.

At this crisis, the dinner-gong sounded, and Deb and I sped away to my room to make a hasty toilet, leaving Rody and Maurice to settle their difference as they pleased. Only for the gong's timely boom, there would certainly have been a fight, or rather Maurice would have thrashed Rody—treated him to that "slight irritation of the cuticle," with which he had threatened him nearly three years previously, so it was just as well that the scene had been interrupted. Excepting at meal-times, I saw nothing of my cousin for nearly a week. He spent most of his time snipe-shooting in the bog, accompanied by an old poacher, called Gilligan, who showed Maurice all the "likely" places.

Gilligan was most enthusiastic, whether about Maurice himself, or the half-sovereigns with which he tipped him, I leave you to guess! Every morning he would send up a message, announcing "to his lordship the Captain," as he called him, that he was awaiting his orders for the day,

and that he knew the whereabouts of several "wisps" of snipe.

"Miss Nora deary," he would say to me confidentially, "will you tell the Captain not to be losing the whole day; tell him the bog is black wid teal, and there's a hare sittin' behind every thraneen of grass in the long meadow."

He had a good opinion of Maurice as a snipe shot, and drew highly-coloured sketches of his prowess with the goon (gun). I was among his audience when he was giving a glowing description of a certain day's sport.

"Faix," said he, "the snipe was risin' in *mists*, and Mr. Maurice knocking them over so fast, that they were hoppin' like hailstones on the ground around him. Miss Nora *honey*," turning to me most insinuatingly, "if ye were as dry as *I* am, you would feel all the better for the least tinte of sperrits and wather. Ax the masther for a glass, and I'll pray for ye!"

Gilligan was a most notorious poacher, and turned many a penny that was anything but honest, selling grandfather's game. It was part of his business to break in young setters, and he fired off his old muzzle-loader much more frequently than was necessary, "to steady the dogs," he affirmed. Many a fat grouse and partridge had lined his capacious pockets.

Thanks to his knowledge of the country, Maurice brought home some heavy bags, the contents of which he emptied out on the kitchen table with no little pride, whilst I sat on one end of it, dangling my long legs, and criticising the birds, and counting and arranging them according to their tribe. Snipe, teal, and hares were his usual spoils, and he never walked less than twenty miles a day in pursuit of this, in my opinion, very poor amusement.

I overheard him confide to grandfather that Gilligan was by no means the indefatigable pedestrian he had been led to expect. He was constantly overtaken by what he termed "a strong wakeness." When seized by one of these "turns," as he called them, a seat on the nearest stone, and a long pull and a strong pull at Maurice's flask were the only remedies to which the complaint would yield!

These attacks became so alarmingly frequent (happening, latterly, about every two hours), that Maurice was obliged to dispense with Mr. Gilligan's attendance altogether.

Poor Gilligan! He fell off a cart and broke his neck, not long afterwards, returning from a fair, where he had been spending a right merry evening. We made a subscription for his widow and children, to which "his lordship the Captain" contributed handsomely.

## CHAPTER VI.

### "FOR LIFE AND DEATH."

Be bolde, Be bolde, and everywhere Be bolde.

*Faerie Queene.*

MAURICE spent the most of his leave at Gallow, and the best part of his days were devoted to shooting and hunting. I must confess that it would have afforded us unmixed satisfaction had he brought home empty bags, and been pounded out with the foxhounds; but we were compelled to admit, even among ourselves, that he both rode and shot remarkably straight; and, more than that, he amazed us by a deed of such daring courage, one frosty Sunday afternoon, that we were obliged to award him a large meed of reluctant, but respectful, admiration.

Maurice was a hero in our eyes—a hero whose sarcasms stung like nettles, who declined our society, derided our manners and appearance, and actually dared to mimic our pure Milesian accent.

There was no shooting on Sunday, and Sunday afternoon was generally dedicated to a long walk or a long sleep. Rody and I, who were aimlessly lounging about the yard, saw Maurice starting off towards the bog, accompanied by Carlo, who was bouncing and bounding round him in a state of exuberant delight.

"Let us go with him," I observed impulsively. "It's a nice dry day for walking on the bog."

"I fancy there will be two words to that," said Rody dubiously. "Beresford would rather have our room than our company, by long chalks."

"We can *offer* ourselves, at any rate," I answered airily, tightening the elastic of my hat, as I commenced to run down the lane, shouting "Maurice! Maurice!" at the top of my melodious voice.

"Well, what's up now?" turning round impatiently.

"Where are you going to?" I panted breathlessly.

"There and back again," was his prompt rejoinder.

"All right, we will go with you," I answered with a smirk. "We are coming with you," I reiterated, launching myself over a very stiff stile with a generous display of navy blue stockings.

"With me?" he echoed, with raised brows and a look of irrepressible disgust. "And what have *I* done to deserve such a treat?"

"Oh, we have nothing else to do, and one walk is as good as another."

"But, supposing that I do not wish for the honour of your company. What *then?*" impressively.

"Oh, we will come all the same," I answered frankly. "The bog is as much ours as yours."

"Undoubtedly," replied Maurice, "but I am going round by the Black Bridge, and you may get more of the bog than you bargain for. It's no easy way for a young lady, and I warn you, that I am not going to drag you out of drains."

"You told me the other day that *young* I was, but *lady* I would never be, so that is nothing; and I should like to see the ditch that *I* could not jump," I concluded boastfully.

"Come on, then," said Maurice, heroically resigning himself to his fate, and starting off at so brisk a walk, that Rody and I could only keep up by assuming a kind of ambling run. For some time we proceeded in silence, over the short green turf, through the whin bushes, and then through the heather, now crossing a deep black bog-hole on a narrow slippery stick, now jumping a wide drain, now scaling a gate. We did not meet a single creature for at least a couple of miles, and then we encountered a boy and girl, who were keeping company. They did not appear very much enamoured of each other, and were walking about six yards apart, the girl rolling and unrolling the corner of her apron, and the man chewing a straw. Both looked extremely sheepish as we passed them, and still more confused, when Rody, glancing over his shoulder, said, in quite a cursory way:

"That's Micky Brennan and his sweetheart, from Brackna. Give her a kiss, Micky! We're none of us looking."

"Be quiet, you young fool!" muttered Maurice angrily.

"Why should I be quiet?" answered Rody argumentatively. "I say," he continued after a silence of a few seconds, "you are as old as Micky. You ought to be thinking of getting married too, eh, Beresford? I heard your uncle tell my father that he hoped you would marry young."

"Really?" with a dubious smile.

"I wonder what she will be like?" said Rody speculatively, after an unusually long pause.

"What who will be like?" asked Maurice absently.

"Mrs. Maurice Beresford to be sure."

"Like *me* of course," I answered, backing gracefully before them both, and winking expressively at Rody.

"Like you!" scoffed Maurice. "I would just as soon fall in love with a chimpanzee or a Red Indian," he added contemptuously.

"Oh, you might do worse!" I replied cheerfully. "Any way the Red Indian would have the worst of the bargain. Oh, my heart on fire! what a temper she would have to deal with, wouldn't she, Rody?"

"What did you say?" demanded Maurice, stopping short and surveying me with grave astonishment. "What is that pretty new expression of yours?"

"It is not mine, and you need not look so shocked; it's in 'Oliver Twist,'" I replied with a triumphant toss of my pigtail.

"Pickpockets' slang," returned Maurice with a shrug of the shoulders, "and all very well for the Artful Dodger, but scarcely——"

"I say, here is a yawner," interrupted Rody, who had been walking on ahead. "I shall go round by the stick in case of accidents. Better be sure than sorry."

"And so shall I," I added emphatically, as my experienced eye took in the width of the deep black drain, with its crumbling, ragged-looking banks, that lay yawning right in our way.

"Beresford will take it!" said Rody confidently. "He thinks he will shake *us* off. Ha, ha!"

And he proved quite correct. Maurice stepped backwards a few paces, pulled his hat well down on his head, made a short run, and landed on the opposite side as lightly



as a deer, and then walked on, evidently perfectly indifferent to *my* fate,—as to whether I made the transit safely, or grovelled in four feet of black bog-water. The stick was narrow, greasy, and extremely wobbly. I found the crossing a very ticklish and delicate manoeuvre, and was loudly assured by Rody from the bank, “that I was for all the world like a cat on walnut-shells.” However, I got over safely, and soon we had overtaken our companion, and were once more frolicking alongside of him, bandying our light-hearted jests, and Maurice, in spite of himself, was gradually drawn into the conversation.

“By the way, French,” he asked, “have you made up your mind what you are going to be—what profession you intend to adorn?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Rody, whirling his stick about; “I would not mind going into the Line if there were no examinations; but they are such a beastly grind—it’s not good enough.”

“Then what would you like to be?”

“Well,” reflectively, “I think I’d like to be a farmer; have a good large place, shooting, plenty of young horses, a couple of hunters, ride and sell, and that sort of thing,” waving his hand expansively.

“Ah, I dare say; a good many young men share your tastes. Why not say a four-in-hand, a steam yacht, and a moor, while you are about it?”

“I know what I would like to be,” I broke in impatiently.

“Well, let us hear,” said Maurice with benignant toleration.

“I should like to be a girl in a circus. I think it must be delightful,” I added rapturously; “nothing to do but ride from morning till night, sticking on, and dancing on those pads. What fun it must be, and quite easy. It’s all done by balance. And I should love performing to crowded houses, and showing off; and after a bit I would come out as first lady rider, in the side-saddle and riding-habit business, and do the *haute école*.”

“And what does your grandfather think of your little scheme?” asked Maurice, with exasperating gravity.

“He would have a fit on the spot if he heard it even mentioned. He thinks a circus *low*, fancy that! I had the

greatest work to get permission to go to Ball's travelling circus here, in Kilcool. I went with Deb ; it was lovely, and oh, how I did envy the girl in the black velvet habit, riding a most lovely Arab horse ! How I wished I were her !"

"What a picture you would make !" exclaimed Maurice with affected rapture. "Well, now I know your tastes. You, French, wish to be a country gentleman, and Nora's ambition is to ride in a circus."

"Oh, that's all humbug ! She is to marry me some day if she is a good girl," responded Rody condescendingly.

"A most suitable match ; permit me to congratulate you both," said Maurice affably. "A charming house yours will be to stay in—booby-traps on all the doors, squibs for supper, and apple-pie beds for your too confiding guests !"

"Well, you need not mind," retorted Rody roughly, "*you* won't be one of them."

"No, you may strike my name off your visiting-list," returned Maurice drily. "I shall *not* intrude."

By this time we had reached the road, and my appearance bore visible traces of our somewhat adventurous walk. My dress was torn, my boots were exceedingly muddy, and my pigtail had come unfastened.

As we stepped over the last stile, Maurice gallantly handed me down, and surveying me with a gaze of cool dispassionate scrutiny, said :

"You look rather picturesque at a distance, but perhaps you are a little disappointing on close inspection, Miss O'Neill."

"She looks like a second-hand scarecrow," added Rody with his usual candour. "By-the-way, I wonder if the train has passed ?"

The line at some little distance crossed the road.

"No, not yet," I replied, replaiting my hair with nimble fingers, as I preceded him along the footpath ; "I see the gates open, and some people going across."

And there, about a hundred yards ahead of us, sure enough, one gate was flung wide, and a man was bungling at the opposite one and endeavouring to unfasten it, whilst a horse and cart,—in which sat a young girl holding the reins,—waited on the line.

"It's Beauty Connor and old Micky," I remarked, as I recognised the pretty face of a well-known country belle.

Her horse, a handsome young bay, was fidgeting and restive, and kept backing, and starting, and pricking its ears, refusing to be soothed and so-ho'ed by the voice of the charmer.

"What is the fellow about? What the mischief is he doing at the gate? He must be drunk!" said Maurice impatiently.

"Of course he is drunk," returned Rody composedly. "Who ever saw old Micky Connor sober on a Sunday; he has been having a drop below at The Cross, and no doubt sees *several* gates."

"I don't envy that girl her drive home," returned Maurice, as he noted the fretting, fiery horse, already reeking with heat and flecked with foam—"and, my God, I hear the train!" he added in a voice of horror. At that moment the low sullen roar of the approaching express was distinctly audible through the thin, frosty air.

"The train, daddy—the train!!" shrieked the girl frantically, standing up in a frenzy of excitement, whilst her horse plunged violently and threatened to upset her. It seemed to be on us almost in a minute—in less than a second it had rounded the curve, and was coming on—so smoothly—so inevitably—and oh, so fast; and still the man was wrestling with the gate, and still the girl was screaming in the cart. It was more like a horrible nightmare than a ghastly reality.

Rody and I stood rooted to the ground, paralysed, unable to move, but trembling all over. The next instant Maurice had dashed across the rails, and in another moment, with a sound of thunder, the mail had gone by, leaving the ground still reverberating, and leaving Beauty Connor safe in Maurice's arms, the cart shattered to a thousand pieces, and the horse a crumpled, convulsive, bleeding object in the middle of the six-foot way.

"How awful!" I exclaimed, shuddering. "You are not hurt, are you?" I asked eagerly, as I ran over to my cousin. "And you have saved her. Oh, Maurice!"

"Yes, she is all right," he answered breathlessly. "But it was a close shave."

His hat had been whirled away and ground into powder. His left hand had been badly cut, his face was unusually white; but he held Beauty in his arms, unhurt and safe.

One could almost tell by his eyes that just now he had looked death in the face, and wrenched a victim from his grasp.

He was supporting Beauty and endeavouring to soothe her, but the awful shock she had just received had entirely unhinged her. She lay with her head on Maurice's breast, her lovely golden hair streaming over his shoulder, weeping hysterically and moaning pitifully, apparently a dead-weight—boneless.

Her father, who had been most effectually sobered by seeing his horse and cart dashed to pieces, and his daughter snatched from a similar fate, at last found his tongue, and hobbling up to us said, "Oh, thin the devil mend it for a train!—Glory be to God, Beauty, me darlin', you are safe and sound; 'tis you that had the narrow escape"—taking hold of her. "Only for the young gintleman from the house, you were in smithereens. Bedad, he saved your life at the risk of his own; faix, the sight left me eyes; I never saw so near a thing, it froze the marrow in me bones. I was bothered with the gate, and I niver heard the train till she was on the top of us, and it was too late.

"And the poor young mare! Oh, Holy Father! You're not a hair the worse, Beauty," depositing his daughter on a stone, and hurrying over to where the animal lay. "Oh, she's destroyed, Mr. Beresford, she's destroyed—'tis in pieces she is! and I, that was reckoning to get sivinty pounds for her at the fair of Cahirmee!" I could not bear horrid sights, and turned my whole attention to Beauty, whilst Rody and Maurice went over and stood beside the dead horse, and listened to old Micky's loud lamentations and invocations. I averted my eyes from that hideous, mangled sight, and the blood-bespattered line, and, overawed and grave for once, endeavoured to soothe poor Beauty, who still sat sobbing and shivering, her turquoise-blue eyes bedimmed with tears, her plaid shawl all torn, and her hair falling loosely round her face and shoulders. But strong country girls have better nerves than finely-organised, tea-drinking young ladies, and Beauty soon came round, dried her eyes, gathered up her hair, picked up her tattered shawl, and, seeing her father and Maurice rejoin us, she stood up, and taking my cousin's hand, said, in a low voice still broken with sobs:

"I humbly thank you, sir. I owe you my life. As long as I live, I'll pray for you day and night on my bended knees. May the Holy Virgin and all the saints protect you—may you have luck and grace wherever you go, be it to the world's end."

Maurice was shy, Maurice blushed, Maurice was extremely embarrassed, as he stood bareheaded on the road, with his hand in Beauty Connor's, receiving her thanks and blessings. I felt proud of him ; I was glad that he was my cousin, for the first time in my life. He was a person to be admired and respected now ; he had saved life ; he had confronted death of his own accord ; and Rody and I agreed, as we slowly wended our way home, that Maurice, as he stood in the setting sun, with his bare curly locks, slight figure, and handsome resolute eyes, looked every inch a hero.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A RUN WITH THE FOXHOUNDS.

Forward and frolic glee was there,  
The will to do—the soul to dare.—*Scott.*

THE well-known "Darefield" hounds hunted in the neighbourhood of Gallow. It was out with them that Tom Connor (grandfather's rough-rider) broke in the young horses, which he afterwards showed off at Ballinasloe or Cahirmee fairs as "first-class weight-carrying hunters." Tom was the greatest humbug in the province of Munster. If a prize had been awarded for drawing the long-bow (especially with regard to his own equestrian exploits), it would have been Tom's lawful due. He was at his best when engaged in the sale of a horse to an inexperienced English customer.

"Is it throt, your honour?" he would say impressively. "He cannot wid convainiance to himself throt *less* than twelve miles an hour."

"Can he gallop, is it? In a shower of rain he can gallop so fast that all the drops fall on his tail."

"Jump wather?" throwing up his eyes, as though to invoke the testimony of heaven and earth. "Why, wouldn't he? It's canal leppin ye mane, of coorse."

Mr. Connor would conclude by flourishing this invaluable animal over the nearest "lep," and selling him to the stranger for a couple of hundred guineas. Tom was a great authority on riding, and admitted, with a certain superb condescension, "that Mr. Maurice rode very well for an *officer*," a class of whose performances in the pigskin he had the meanest opinion. How I envied Maurice, as day after day I saw him prancing down the avenue on a handsome young hunter, bound for a meet of the foxhounds!

"Why should I not accompany him?" This was a

question that I asked myself ten times an hour. I had a good horse, and if Tom was to be relied upon, my riding "bated all he *ivir* saw!" Then, query, why should not "Freney" and I disport ourselves in the hunting-field? This idea, which had been simmering in my brain for months, I at last found courage to introduce to grandfather, abruptly, of course.

"Grandfather," I exclaimed, suddenly bursting into the library, having stood quaking outside with the handle of the door in my grasp for at least ten minutes, "grandfather, may I go to the hunt to-morrow with Maurice? Do let me!"

Grandfather gazed at me over the edge of his paper for some moments, in reflective silence. I think he must have been softened by the share-list, for, to my great amazement, he deliberately replied:

"You may go if you like, if your cousin will take you."

"Oh, may I? Oh, thank you, *thank* you, grandfather!" I returned with an irrepressible jump of delight. Then I glanced at Maurice, who had suddenly laid down his book, and was regarding me with a curious and not altogether amiable expression of countenance.

"You'll let me go with you, won't you, Maurice? I'll be no trouble to you—in fact, I'll show you the way," I added with a giggle of boastful complacency.

"I'll have nothing to say to it," replied Maurice, rising and figuratively washing his hands of me. "I could not undertake to be responsible for her," turning to grandfather with grave protestation.

"*Can* she ride?" he added dubiously. "I know she goes tearing about the fields like an escaped lunatic; but she will want a little judgment, and a certain amount of horsemanship to follow the foxhounds."

"You may make your mind easy about her riding, Maurice," said grandfather drily, and without raising his eyes from his all-absorbing paper. "You will find that she can take care of herself."

"But I assure you, sir——" returned Maurice vehemently. I did not want to hear what his assurance or argument might be; I was fully resolved to accompany him at *any* cost, no matter what he said, or thought, or did; and I sped out of the room, dashed down to the servants' hall,

and electrified Dan, who was reading a greasy-looking *Freeman's Journal*, with the astonishing news that I was going to the hunt the next morning, and to be sure and give Freney no water, and have him saddled and ready to the minute of ten o'clock.

Then I flew upstairs and devoted the remainder of the evening to preparing my toilet for the great event; mended my gloves, polished up the handle of my whip, sought out a cherished blue tie, and gave my habit an extra brushing. That night I could hardly sleep; I thought over the delicious prospect, then dozed off into broken slumber, then woke again.

Once I *dreamt* that it was a *dream*; the mere thought was madness. I got up and struck a light. No, it was all right; there was my gray habit spread out on the old sofa, with a collar neatly tacked in by my own hands before going to bed. There were my gloves, my whip, and my veil. "No, it was no dream," I exclaimed, as with a skip of delight I once more blew out the candle and jumped into bed.

Behold us the following morning, the cynosure of an admiring circle, as we took our departure from the hall-door. Never was young lady escorted by a more reluctant cavalier than mine. We trotted side by side in silence for a considerable distance, Maurice's face looking as black as thunder, and expressive of speechless disgust, I wearing a smirk of airy elation on my radiant countenance. What did I care for Maurice's black looks?—not one straw! Grandfather had given me leave to go to the hunt, and *ten* Maurices would not keep me at home. My companion cast more than one doubtful glance at my gray tweed habit and sealskin cap—not the orthodox ladies' hunting get-up by any manner of means; but inspection, I flatter myself, assured him that I would not "come to pieces," and that, as far as riding went, I was "all there," as he afterwards expressed it. It was "a fine, soft morning," to quote Dan; a thin Scotch mist was lightly drizzling, the sharp frosty feeling so detrimental to hunting had left the atmosphere, and falling—perish the thought—would be *safe*!

Cantering gaily along the grass at the side of the road, I felt ready for anything, from charging a gate, downwards; so



did Freney apparently, as, reduced to a walk, he sidled conceitedly along the road. Maurice's snorting steed, a handsome brown four-year-old, conscious of all the glories of a brand new bridle, of his youth, and fine personal appearance, looked exactly what Tom Connor had described him, downright "rampageous," and fit to fly out of his skin !

We arrived punctually at the meet, which was in the village of Rusk, about six miles from Kilcool. It was already pretty full ; the long, narrow street was crowded with led-horses, horsemen in groups, and horsemen slowly riding up and down in twos and threes.

Equipages, varying from the lordly drag to the lowly ass's car, lined the street at either side ; deeply-laden jaunting-cars were to be counted by the dozen, and spectators by the hundred.

Maurice and I followed the general example, and kept our horses slowly moving to and fro.

As we passed a gay, yellow landau, a large, fair, bold-looking woman, half buried in furs, put up her eyeglass, and calmly surveyed us from head to foot with an air of supercilious interest.

"Now who are *they*?" she asked of a moustached dandy, who, with a bunch of violets in the button-hole of his exquisite pink coat, was ranged up alongside.

A block in front compelled me to hear his reply.

"Don't know, I'm shaw (sure)—a new variety of the natives. Queer cut of a girl, eh?"

I moved on, scarlet. I glanced at Maurice ; he had heard, I was sure, for he looked rather angry. "I *am* a queer cut," I confess to myself, as I observe two ladies riding towards us, got up in neat blue habits, severely plain stick-up collars, and tall hats. My sealskin cap, blue tie (which I thought the *ne plus ultra* of elegance), and my wide, flapping, chamois-leather gauntlets, were all out of place. I consoled myself by a critical inspection of Maurice—at any rate, *he* was all right. His modest black coat, leathers, tops, and dog-skin gloves bore favourable comparison with the rest of the crowd. I felt a secret thrill of satisfaction, as I saw more than one approving eye cast upon Freney, and overheard a gloomy-looking little man, in extraordinarily tight trousers, describe him to his companion as "an uncommon likely, well ribbed-up, little *harse*."

A move, a murmur in the throng, "the hounds were coming." I craned my neck and saw four or five red coats trotting across the bridge, followed by a lot of agitated tails.

A few minutes later we were jogging along in their wake, towards that famous domain of the fox family, "Gonnerby's Gerso." I felt quite wild with excitement, as I cantered up two fields. I was *not* to be restrained by Maurice's angry entreaties. I flatly refused to wait on the road with the carriages. I would, and should, see the hounds put into cover. I watched with all my eye-power, their tails busily waving through the furze, and Frenoy and I both quivered with repressed anticipation, as we listened to the sharp crack of the thong, artistically wielded by the first whip. All at once, there was a move, a sudden cessation of talking, cigars were flung away, and men began to settle themselves firmly in their saddles. The commotion increased. Simultaneously with the talismanic words, "Gone away," the fox broke in full view of the field, and we all rushed madly and furiously down hill, and made for the only open gate.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, let the hounds out! Give the hounds a chance, gentlemen, I *implore* you!" shouted the nearly frantic master.

It was not a bit of use; he might as well have talked to the wind! The field, like people themselves hotly pursued, were already cramming, jostling, and pushing each other through the aforementioned gate, and at least a dozen were away with the leading couples of hounds. Soon I was away also. It was all I could do to hold Frenoy; his excitement was more than a match for mine. I could barely steady him over the first two fences, through which he crashed, seemingly regardless of *any* consequences. I observed a small elderly gentleman just in front of me, mounted on a brown hunter with a white streak in his tail, and I immediately adopted *him* as my guiding star or pilot, and followed him faithfully. In and out of a breen (lane) we went, across some large stubble fields, and several enormous double ditches, which Frenoy took like a cat. I saw nothing of Maurice, nor did I miss him. I only wanted to see the hounds, and, if possible, the fox. We were making for the hill of Dare. I had still sense enough to see, but I felt (and, no doubt, looked) quite crazy with excitement.

I had already seen one or two loose horses, and witnessed various croppers. At first I had a vague idea of offering assistance and stopping to sympathise; but finding that others galloped pitilessly on—my pilot included—I did the same. Again we crossed a road, and again the ground descended. At the bottom of a large grass field I descried a rather formidable wall, cope, and dash, a novelty in the Darefield country, so famous for banks and doubles.

One man was slowly and weakly setting his horse at it, and two others were vaguely looking up and down the field in search of a friendly gap.

"No, my friends," I mentally exclaimed, as my well-trained eye took in the obstacle, "you will not find a lower place, look as you like."

I observed, as I drew nearer, that one of them was the dandy who considered me "a queer cut of a girl." None of them liked the place, that was very evident, and one of them drawled out ironically: "Make way for the lady—she'll give us a lead;" and they moved to one side as I came galloping up.

I put my horse at the wall rather slowly, and threw up my right arm, as he made a tremendous bound into the air—a satisfactory bound—we cleared the obstacle cleverly. We were over, and in another second Freney and I were skimming away across the next field. As we landed lightly on an "on-and-off," or crashed through bushes, or tore along the headlands, I believe I was actually the happiest girl in the whole world. There was one short check as the fox turned from the hill of Dare, skirted round it, and made for King's Court at its foot. Over a fence into a boggy plantation, I lost my sealskin cap; but what of that, since I had long since lost my head! Three minutes later, we emerged into the lawn, over a nasty wet ditch, and I observed, with a sensation *no* words can describe, that there were only three people with the hounds beside myself—the huntsman, a steeplechase jockey, and my friend on the brown hunter. A stiff post and rails divided the park from the pleasure-ground. Over we sailed, close on the huntsman's heels.

"The lady for iver!" screamed three or four eager-eyed spectators. "If it isn't little Miss O'Neill, may I never—— It's herself is the divil to ride?" cried an old

earth-stopper, waving his tattered cawbeen madly round his head. "More power to your elbow, miss!"

Close by, among some laurels, I heard a tremendous scrimmage. The huntsman cried: "Who-oo! worry—worry—worry!" and, jumping off his horse, plunged into the middle of the pack.

The poor fox was dead. I was sincerely sorry for him, although I had been one of his most ardent pursuers.

"It's all over, I suppose?" I asked breathlessly.

"All over *this* time, miss," returned the first whip, glancing curiously at me, as I sit bareheaded on my panting, blowing bay, whose throbbing sides and extended forelegs give evidence of a long gallop. "Uncommon good going too—forty-five minutes racing pace."

A few minutes later the rest of the field straggled up, Maurice included. There was a cut on his cheek; he had evidently had a fall—ditto his steed, whose head and chest were plastered with mud. He looked not a little surprised to find me, sitting Freney in an easy, *déçagé* attitude, without a cap, and with my tawny mane flowing down my back, receiving congratulations and commendations from a very considerable audience.

However *outré* might have been my appearance, I had ridden boldly and well. I had lived from first to last, throughout one of the fastest runs of the season. "Where were the two correctly got-up young ladies *now*? Where was the dandy with the violets in his button-hole?" I thought as I triumphantly glanced round. I was quite the mistress of the position, the heroine of the hour.

Several gentlemen who knew grandfather came up and talked to me, and said very nice things about my horse and my riding. I was cordially invited into King's Court to partake of luncheon and to rest. "To rest!" as if it were likely I could rest when I had just been presented with the brush! Oh, ecstatic moment! when the wet, draggled piece of fur was attached to the off side of my saddle by the nimble and respectful fingers of the huntsman himself! Rest, indeed, I would not *rest*, till all Gallow and Kilcool were ringing with my triumph!

My cap was found in the plantation-hedge and restored to me, and I now wanted nothing to complete my happiness.

I felt a very fine person indeed, as I bowed and nodded my

adieux, and trotted off home. As I went along I mentally reviewed every fence and every field, riding the whole run over again, wrapt up in contemplation almost too blissful to realise. Maurice was nearly as proud as I was myself; and I was more impressed by his few words of warm praise and congratulation than all the other grand compliments put together. I cannot describe the grim satisfaction of grandfather, when I burst into the library, and laid the brush on the table before him, much in the same way as a dog would bring a stick to his master. Neither will I linger to relate the rapture of Dan, of Deb, of Patsy White, and Tom Connor; even Sweetlips vouchsafed a grunt of approbation.

As I had no means of indulging in "the sport of kings" without Maurice's countenance, I turned over a new leaf with regard to him, and endeavoured to propitiate him by an access of politeness that must have puzzled him not a little. I ceased to allow myself the pleasure of slamming doors in his face and contradicting him flatly. I now agreed recklessly and indiscriminately with *everything* he said; ran his errands, fetched him the newspaper, pushed the butter and salt in his direction at meal-times, and even went so far as to mend his gloves! I don't think he liked me one bit the better all the same; I am sure he still looked upon me as a rude, ugly, ill-tempered hoyden. However, he suffered me to accompany him to the neighbouring meets, and that was all I cared for. On the topic of hunting and riding we met on neutral ground, and discussed various runs and our joint experiences most amiably together, as we jogged home, side by side, those dim, damp, December afternoons; but, once dismounted, we assumed our ordinary attitude towards each other, viz., an armed peace.

At the end of January, Maurice returned to Dublin. I witnessed his departure with very sincere regret; I had now no escort, and was consequently no longer permitted to grace (?) the hunting-field.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### MY FATE IS FIXED.

All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter.—*Edmund Burke.*

ONE bright spring morning the post-bag brought very bad news to Gallow. New speculations, in which grandfather was shareholder, had failed, and not only had he lost all his investments, but was liable to pay a large sum of money besides. He hurried to Dublin by the first available train, and remained absent for nearly a week. It turned out that all his hoardings, all his carefully saved capital, were swept away, and nothing remained to him but Gallow. He returned home with this intelligence a changed and broken-down old man, apparently aged by ten years. He ceased to take any interest whatever in the farm; his bureau knew him no more. He would sit for hours in his armchair absorbed in thought, or would creep about the place, patiently followed by Snap—with his head down, and tail between his legs, as he seemed to think it his duty to assume a melancholy and gloomy aspect, when in attendance on his master.

Economy became more than ever the order of the day. The fat cob, chestnut Kate, and Freney were all doomed. The two former were purchased by a French dealer, and Freney became the property of a master of foxhounds in a neighbouring county.

He had been reared on the land; everyone remembered him a skittish, long-legged foal, with a tail like a piece of fur, and all the establishment witnessed his departure with the deepest regret. As for me, I refused meat and drink. I shut myself up in my bower for two whole days, refusing to be comforted. In vain had been my pleadings—my

tears! Grandfather, with a cheque for £150 in prospect, was flint—Freney must go. The day he was led off to his new owner was one I shall never forget, I really believed that my heart was *broken*, and until the very last hour I was at Gallow, I never passed his empty stall without a pang. Freney fortunately fell into the hands of a good master, and made himself such a name with the “Do-or-Die” Hunt, that he is now passing the autumn of his days an honoured pensioner.

Before summer was over, Maurice came down to Gallow to take leave of grandfather before sailing for India. Our establishment being now so much reduced, the *twig* was sent to meet him at the station. Dinner that evening was by no means a convivial or festive entertainment. Grandfather was in one of his most melancholy moods, and kept constantly referring to his losses and his health.

“I’m an old man now,” he would say querulously, “and not much good for anything; it’s time I was out of this, I’m not wanted here.”

This was certainly hard upon Maurice, who replied:

“I hope you will be here for many years yet, sir. We are a long-lived family.”

“No, no,” returned grandfather peevishly, “I don’t care how soon I go. It won’t be long before I’m carried out feet foremost, and laid along with the others,” nodding his head in the direction of the family vaults. “Then you’ll be master here; every stick and stone is entailed and goes to you—and I don’t care how soon I’m out of it; the sooner the better; it will not matter much to anyone but Nora. She’ll be a beggar.”

I was sitting in the deep window-sill, behind grandfather, buried in a book, but hearing my name and fate thus suddenly dragged into the conversation, I dropped my story and pricked up my ears.

“Nora shall never be a beggar, as long as I’m to the fore, you may rely on that, sir,” returned Maurice generously. “I will provide for her in any way you wish.”

“In any way I wish,” echoed grandfather, pausing deliberately between each word as though weighing its meaning.

“It would be a grand thing, a fine thing, the two last

of the family," he muttered to himself, as, resting his chin on his hands, and his hands on the top of his stick, he gave himself up to some moments of very serious reflection. Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he turned sharply round in his chair, and espied *me*, ensconced in my usual nook, my book face downwards in my lap, and my whole attitude, to be summed up in one ordinary military word, "attention."

"Leave the room, Nora," emphasising the order with a peremptory thump of his stick. "Leave the room; I wish to speak to your cousin."

There was no help for it, comfortable though I was—warmly as I was interested in the conversation, I must go.

My social instincts were strong, and I would have much preferred to remain in the dining-room, to roaming about alone; for it was now holiday-time, and Miss Flucker was spending the vacation in the bosom of her family.

I rose with aggravating leisure, tucked "Frank Farleigh" under my arm, and sauntered out of the room, seating myself on the hall-door steps, where I divided my time between the history of mad Bess's wild career, the homeward sailing rooks, and vague speculations on the conversation going on within that fast-shut door on the left.

I was still the slave of a tyrannical appetite, as far as fruit was concerned; and after a while, I closed my book, and set out for the garden. There I wandered up and down the wide gravel paths, now culling a carnation, now consuming a pear or a plum, till a sharp corner suddenly brought me *vis-à-vis* to Sweetlips, who was to be found on the premises at any hour.

He was in the act of closing the melon-frame as I strolled into view. This excellent fruit was his especial pride and hobby, and a certain family of delicious little green melons were nursed by him with more than a mother's care. Recent inspection of his treasures had not been satisfactory, for, shutting the frame with an angry bang, and shaking a rake furiously in my direction, he wheezed out:

"I wouldn't doubt ye! See now, Miss Nora, you really are a terrible young girl—there's no two words about it; you're a *thief*! How *dar* you go to take the very melon



that I've been watching these three days? See now, I'll stand it no longer; I must just tell the grandfather. Maybe he'll be able to conthrol ye; but I'm thinking it would be aisier to turn the river Shannon with a pitchfork than to keep ye off the flowers and fruit. Ere yesterday," his choler rising at the mere recollection, "you picked every *wan* of the best Glory of John roses (*Gloire de Dijon*), and gave them to the lame girl at The Cross. You ought to be ashamed of yourself! See now!"

Here he paused, absolutely breathless, and I, boiling with indignation, was figuratively about to draw my sword, and fall upon him, when I caught sight of big Mary's portly form and white apron at the gate.

Her gesticulations were those of haste, so I merely contented myself with remarking to Sweetlips "that I believed he sold the fruit on the sly, and that *that* was the reason he could not bear to see me eat it, and that if anyone was a *thief*, it was himself!" and hastily gathering my dress in a large wisp under my arm, I sped down the walk like a lapwing, nearly overturning big Mary by the velocity of my arrival.

"Well, what is it?" I panted eagerly.

"'Tis this," holding up an orange-coloured envelope; "a telegram for Mr. Maurice, and the gossoon is waiting in the kitchen to have it signed; and 'tis in a mortal hurry he is, for he swears he won't pass the berryin' ground no later than nine."

"Little idiot!" I ejaculated scornfully. "Well, and why don't you take it in to Mr. Maurice at once? What are you waiting for?" I asked imperiously.

"Is it take it into the dining-room?" she answered in a shrill key of interrogation. "Sure, the masther give orders as how no one was to go next or nigh him. He and Mr. Maurice are talking great sacrets, from all I can make out."

"Then, Mary, you must have been listening at the keyhole," I observed austere.

"Get out with your nonsense, Miss Nora! It would be as much as our places was worth to be settin' foot in the hall, much less show our noses inside the dining-room door!"

"And I'm to show *mine*, and have it snapped off for my

pains! I dare say, indeed!" turning away with a derisive laugh.

"But Miss Nora honey, Miss Nora deary, you *must* take it in; there's no one else to do it but yourself," she urged imploringly. "Do now, there's a darling girl?"

"Well, I'm not such a coward as you are, big Mary. Grandfather can't *kill* me. Here, hand it over, and I'll take it," I said, drawing myself up with an assumption of dignity, smoothing down my ruffled locks, and then marching up the steps, with the spirit of the leader of a forlorn hope.

"Who hesitates is lost," was a motto that I had frequently borne in mind out hunting, and, indeed, most of my acts were signalised by an amount of decision and promptitude bordering on rashness.

With my favourite motto on the tip of my tongue, and dispensing with a knock, I burst open the dining-room door, and plunged headlong into the society of my relations.

"Go away!" shouted grandfather, half rising.

"In one second, grandfather; I must first give this to Maurice," I replied, waving my telegram as my flag of truce, and advancing towards my cousin.

He was sitting at the table, resting his head on his hand, and even in the dim waning light, *I*, who was by no means remarkable for studying other people's feelings, or appearance, even *I* was awe-struck—nay, almost cowed—by the pallor of his face and the gloomy expression of his countenance. He looked as if some heavy load of care had suddenly been transferred to his shoulders.

Grandfather, on the other hand, appeared to have happily got rid of some burden, for he was leaning back in his armchair, his stick between his knees, and his whole air reminded me of former days, when he had recently achieved some monetary triumph.

Maurice slowly opened the telegram, cast his eyes over its contents, and then tossed it aside.

"I must go to-morrow," he observed with much decision.

"Must you, so soon? Eh, well, well, well," regretfully. "Now, Nora, we don't want *you* here; be off. Go to your bed; I want to talk to your cousin."

Little did I guess, as I wended my way up to my own

special sanctum, the vital interest that *I* had in the discussion from which I was so sternly excluded. Little did I dream, as I sat in the window, with my elbows on the sill, and gazed out into the darkening autumn evening, that at that very hour—nay, that very moment—my future fate was trembling in the balance.

## CHAPTER IX.

### SURPRISING NEWS.

Oh wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful, wonderful !  
*As You Like It.*

THE next afternoon was indeed a fateful one to me. In my summer garb of brown holland, with hands stuck in the pockets of my black alpaca apron, and a white sun-bonnet jauntily perched on the top of my head, I was superintending Sweetlips and his grandson denuding my favourite apple-tree of hundreds of sweet "seek-no-further" for the Dublin market. I was so completely absorbed, in a skyward direction, that I gave quite a violent start, when I suddenly heard Maurice say: "Nora, your grandfather wants you in the library at once."

With lightning speed I mentally reviewed my career for the past week. I could not remember any misdeed deserving such terrible consequences as a visit to the library.

"What is it, Maurice—do you know?" I asked with unconcealed anxiety.

"You will hear soon enough," was his discouraging reply.

"I left the gate of the haggard open yesterday, and some of the cows got in and pulled down half a rick—it can hardly be *that*?" I again inquire nervously.

Maurice vouchsafed no reply, as he opened the garden-gate and imperiously waved me through.

His silence was ten times more eloquent than words, and my heart sank down to my shoes as I glanced at him. He looked very odd, I thought, unusually grave, and extremely pale. He and grandfather must have had a row: but how could I possibly be mixed up in it? I was still cudgelling my brains unsuccessfully as I followed my cousin

into the library with lagging, faltering steps. He immediately walked over to the window and stood looking out, leaving me alone to face grandfather, Mr. French, and a queer-looking, wizened old gentleman I had never seen before.

"Nora," began grandfather abruptly, pushing back his chair and surveying me over his spectacles, as I stood in a culprit attitude at the other side of the table, "you know you are now nearly fifteen, and old enough to be told, that if anything happens to me, you will be a beggar. You have no relations to receive you, and the poorhouse will be your only home."

I stared at him blankly, vainly endeavouring to realise this appalling piece of intelligence.

"You have sense enough to see that every farthing I possess must go to your cousin Maurice. That is clear to you, is it not?"

"Yes," I answered mechanically, glancing to where the future proprietor of Gallow stood, still staring out of the window with his hands in his pockets.

"Your cousin has promised you a home here," resumed grandfather; "you and he are the last of the family—the good old family," he added with a regretful pause.

"Yes," I again assented, wondering within myself if grandfather was not a little touched in the head. I had heard it hinted more than once that his mind had been affected by his money troubles, and that he was a little *queer*. His next remark completely took away my breath.

"Your cousin Maurice has promised me to *marry* you by the time you are twenty years of age."

I stared at him—at Maurice—at Mr. French; they were not even smiling, although of course it was a joke. I stood gazing from one to the other in blank bewilderment.

"I shall have the happiness of knowing that my granddaughter will live and die a Beresford of Gallow; and you, Maurice," looking towards his nephew, "will have the satisfaction of remembering that you have brightened the end of my days, and fulfilled my dearest wish. I know that a Beresford's word is as good as his bond—you have given me your solemn promise."

"I have," said Maurice, approaching the table, and speaking in a low but perfectly distinct tone.

"Then take your cousin's hand, and put this ring on her finger," continued grandfather, producing an ancient heirloom, valuable, but hideous; "it will be a pledge between you," he added impressively.

With cold and even trembling fingers, Maurice took the ring, and endeavoured to fit it on me, Mr. French and the wizened old gentleman superintending the performance with the gravest interest.

It was absurdly large for me—my *thumb* was the only digit equal to the occasion; but Maurice put my proffered thumb aside, and placed the ring on the bony middle finger of my left hand. I endeavoured to suppress with all my might an overwhelming desire to giggle, but my efforts were not altogether successful.

"Come here, Nora," said grandfather in a terrible tone; "take that thing off your head!"

I obediently removed the sun-bonnet, and discovered my grinning visage.

"Girl!" he exclaimed in a voice of thunder, seizing me roughly by the arm, "do you understand that some day you are to marry your cousin Maurice? Do you hear me?" he reiterated furiously.

"Yes, grandfather," I answered, completely cowed.

"Promise me that as long as he lives you will never marry anyone else—answer me at once."

"It's not a joke, is it, grandfather?" I faltered tearfully.

"Joke!" he echoed, bringing his hand down on the table with such violence that all the books jumped, and the papers were sent flying.

"It seems hardly fair to bind her in such a way," interposed Maurice; "she is much too young to realise what she is doing!"

"It shall be as binding on her as on you."

"Give me your promise, Nora," grandfather proceeded, totally ignoring Maurice's appeal.

"I promise," I responded in a whisper. I would have promised *anything*, under the circumstances, in order to escape.

"Very well, mind you keep your word. Now you may go," releasing my arm with a push. "Be off."

I obeyed him with alacrity, leaving the room in double

the haste with which I had entered it, and at once made my way to the empty drawing-room, my favourite resort, where, coiled up in one of the deep window-seats, I endeavoured to collect my thoughts and adjust my ideas.

I was engaged to be married, and to Maurice of all people! I could not grasp the fact, it eluded even *my* active imagination. What would Deb and Rody say, when they heard that I was to be the bride of our common enemy? And Miss Fluker, how would *she* take it! Ecstatic thought, perhaps she would be sent away, and I would have no more lessons! Maybe Maurice could be induced to buy back Freney.

Rid me of Miss Fluker, and restore Freney! From this point of view my engagement looked *coulour de rose*.

But, on the other hand, I detested Maurice; and if Maurice liked *me* he had certainly an odd way of showing it. He had concealed his preference most successfully.

However, it never occurred to me to question the arrangement, no more than I would have dreamt of trying to prevent the snow or rain falling. Grandfather and Maurice had settled it all; and grandfather's word had been my law, as long as I could remember.

My notions on the subject of love and marriage were of the vaguest. I had never read but one romance or love-story in my life—and that was "Thaddeus of Warsaw," over which I wept the bitterest and saltiest of tears. Miss Fluker, although herself a ravenous devourer of light literature, utterly discouraged anything of the sort as far as we were concerned. *L'appétit vient en mangeant*, and I had never had any chance of acquiring a taste for novels. Moreover, to tell the truth, I did not care for reading, and rarely opened a book for my own amusement. Five years was a long way off. I could barely recollect events when I tried to look back over the past five years; it seemed such remote ages since I was ten years old. Surely this other five would be as long in passing.

My meditations were interrupted by the entrance of my future husband! Closing the door carefully behind him, he came over to where I sat, huddled up in a corner of the window-seat, chewing one of the strings of my bonnet

and the end of profound reflection. Leaning against the opposite shutter, he surveyed me thoughtfully for some seconds. Truly I was not much to look at, at the best of times.

After a moment's silence he said :

"Well, Nora?"

"Well, Maurice?" I echoed, gazing at him with a face of blank misgiving and round, incredulous eyes.

"I wanted to ask you to say nothing about what has occurred this afternoon, it is to be kept a profound secret."

"It is not a hoax?" I exclaimed, rising and looking at him searchingly. The more I looked at Maurice, the more outrageously improbable the whole thing appeared.

"No, certainly not," he answered quickly.

"And are you and I really what is called 'engaged to be married?'" I inquired with perfectly unabashed mien.

"We are," he returned unhesitatingly.

As I gazed in his face—absolutely solemn in its expression of deep gravity—the idea tickled my fancy to such an extent, that I leant against my shutter, and laughed till I was perfectly exhausted—Maurice meanwhile surveying me with an expression of the deepest indignation and disgust. Evidently the situation did not present its comic side to *him*.

The more angry he looked, the more I laughed. I could not help it. I was becoming quite hysterical, and the tears were actually coursing down my cheeks.

"After all," he exclaimed impatiently, "this excellent joke, as you seem to think it, may never come off. One of us may die," he added, quite cheerfully.

"One, or both," I returned, drying my eyes as I spoke. "In case only one dies, is the survivor to go into mourning? I have never been in mourning," I observed pensively.

"Do be serious for one moment, Nora," said my cousin angrily; "promise me to keep this arrangement a dead secret." He called it an arrangement, not an engagement.

"May I not tell Deb?" I asked, with a quaver of consternation in my voice.

"Certainly not; you will tell *no* one," he answered authoritatively.



Authoritative manners sat rather well on Maurice ; but, if he thought that he was going to keep *me* in order, he would soon find his mistake, I observed to myself *en passant*.

"Tell me," I commenced boldly, "tell me, Maurice, why do you wish, why do you want——"

Here I hesitated and stammered.

"To marry you?" put in Maurice. "Is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, for family reasons; and, in short, because I choose."

"And how about the chimpanzee, or Red Indian?" I asked judicially.

"Oh, that was only a joke, you know," reddening.

"You wish it, as well as grandfather?" I persisted.

"Of course I do," he rejoined, avoiding my eye, and staring fixedly at the elms on the lawn, as if there was something about them specially interesting.

"But, Maurice," I remonstrated, "how can you—I—we? I—that is to say—I don't think you like me very much."

"Don't I! You must be labouring under a monstrous delusion, my good Nora," he returned, looking at me with an odd smile.

"No, you *don't*," I persisted; "and only that you are almost the only relation I have in the world, I don't like you at all. I can't bear you!"

"Well, at any rate, you are candid. Perhaps you will like me some day, Nora? At any rate, it won't be my fault if you don't. We will get on very well together, you will see," replied Maurice, looking at me with an expression in his dark gray eyes that might have been compassion—and it might not.

"We shall be like two Kilkenny cats, or Laurence Mooney and his wife at the cross-roads, who are always beating each other," I remarked trenchantly.

"Not quite so bad as all that," rejoined Maurice. "However, our wedding-day is in the far-away future; we need not think of it for years and years. It seems preposterous even talking of it to a child like you, but, as I am going abroad, your grandfather wished it to be all settled,

in case he may not be here when I return. Forget all about it for the next half-dozen years, as *I* shall. You may consider yourself a free and a fetterless thing till you are one-and-twenty; and, by the way, *I* had better keep the ring."

I handed it over in silence.

"I am leaving Gallow this afternoon, as I dare say you know," he added after a moment's pause.

"Yes, I know," I answered with perfect composure of countenance.

"I wonder what you will be like when next I see you?" he said, looking at me reflectively.

"I shall always be *ugly*, so don't build upon any great change in my personal appearance," I remarked with unusual gravity.

"I don't mind that—'handsome is that handsome does,'" he responded consolingly. "But I hope you will steady down, and pay some attention to your lessons. Now is the time to learn; you will regret your idleness when you are grown up, and find yourself a dunce."

"Shall I?" I sneered.

"I hope you will be attentive to your grandfather."

"Yes; is there anything else you hope?" I asked ironically.

"A great deal," he replied unsuspectingly. "You see, I have an interest in you *now*, Nora, and I hope to find you much improved, quiet, well-informed, amiable, and lady-like."

"You don't mean to say so?" I burst forth. "Well, and I have an interest in you, Maurice," I went on, mimicking his tone to the life. "I hope to find you less of a donkey, and less of a conceited prig, and more of a pleasant companion! Have you anything else to hope?" I demanded defiantly, tossing my sun-bonnet out of the window, which overlooked a wide grassy area running round the house.

"I was only speaking for your good, and I see it is worse than useless. You are an incorrigible tomboy, as perverse and obstinate as a mule."

"There, that will do," I broke in rudely. "Too many compliments all at once will only turn my head. We won't mind any more just at present. Keep them till we meet again," I concluded, stepping out on the window-sill, and

jumping lightly after my bonnet. As I picked it up I made him a mock curtsy. "Good-bye, Cousin Maurice," I exclaimed, waving it towards him by the strings; "make your mind quite, *quite* easy about my manners, appearance, and education. Good-bye!" And with a final wave of my head-gear, I disappeared into the neighbouring shrubbery.

## CHAPTER X.

### “THE DEATH COACH.”

And nothing can we call our own, but Death.  
*King Richard III.*

I WAS determined not to see Maurice again before his departure. Supposing grandfather were to send for me, and institute a formal and appropriate leave-taking! Supposing he were to order Maurice to seal our engagement, and our parting, with a kiss! I became hot all over at the mere idea. However, it would be no less terrible to Maurice than it would to me, I said to myself with a giggle of triumphant complacency, as I fled with accelerated haste towards a favourite hiding-place—an old copper beech—and hoisting myself nimbly into the fork, climbed up among the shady branches, where, having found my desired haven, I seated myself, very much out of breath, and with an unusually brilliant complexion. I remained in my retreat, comfortably perched on a thick wide bough of the beech, till I heard the workpeople's bell ring at six o'clock, and then I knew that *he* must be gone, and that I might descend in safety; so I lost no time in scrambling down, and returning to the haunts of man. I found that no one appeared to be aware of my engagement to Maurice; I was still treated as a child, and snubbed and lectured as much as ever. Grandfather never alluded to it, neither did Mr. French. Could I have dreamt it? I asked myself more than once. As autumn advanced, grandfather relinquished his accustomed walk round the farm, then his outings diminished to the garden, and finally altogether; he was what the country people called “greatly failed,” and would sit cowering over the fire for hours at a time. I pitied him sincerely, and did *what* I could to brighten him up, bringing in all the news about the place: descriptions of

the new calves, of the turf-rick ; an account of the sudden death of Patsy White's fat pig, etc. ; and even braced up my courage, and offered to read to him every evening, an offer he accepted indifferently, saying "I might if I liked ;" but after a little he looked upon it as a regularly established custom, and I read the paper to him for at least an hour after dinner. When I had picked out every morsel of news of the smallest interest at Gallow, he would lean back in his chair, cover his head with his red silk handkerchief, and remain perfectly silent until bedtime.

Whether he was asleep or not, it was impossible to say ; I think *not*, as I often heard him muttering to himself, and sighing heavily. Punctually as the clock struck ten, he would take his stick, whistle to Snap, and hobble off to his own apartment.

Early in the spring, in bleak March weather, a bad cold confined him to his room.

"I will never go downstairs again, never leave this alive," was his invariable answer to all inquiries. In vain I endeavoured to cheer him up.

"You are not so old as Patsy White," I would say, "and he walked into Kilcool to second mass last Sunday."

"I'll never see Kilcool again, and I don't care either," grandfather would reply. "My day is over, and I'm not sorry—you are provided for at any rate, Nora—no Beresford ever broke his word." He seemed to take great pleasure in this reflection, and would repeat it over and over again, with unwearying satisfaction.

"You and Miss Fluker will live here till Maurice comes home," he said to me one day. "Be a good wife, a good woman—like your grandmother, God bless her !"

He had never alluded to grandmother before, and now he constantly spoke of her. "Will she know me, do you think ?" he asked earnestly. "'Tis thirty-five years since she left me—a young, active, good-looking fellow, and now I'm an old, crippled, broken-down dotard." I looked on this kind of talk as a very bad sign, and when big Mary informed me, in an awe-struck tone one morning, as she stood at my bedside armed with my hot-water can, "that ere last night, Peter Cassidy had seen 'the Death Coach' turning into the berryin' ground," I no longer entertained the smallest hopes of grandfather's recovery.

"The Death Coach," so called, and firmly believed in by the country people, was invariably described as a big black carriage, with a black hammercloth, a black coachman, and four coal-black horses. Previous to the death of a Beresford, this sombre vehicle was constantly seen driving about the roads on moonlight nights, frightening the belated wayfarer into fits. I had never beheld it, thank goodness! but I had heard it spoken of over and over again. Big Mary declared that it had passed her in the avenue one evening, and she stood aside thinking it was a real carriage. It had four black horses, and was driven by a coachman with a three-cornered hat on his head, and a power of curly hair. She did not see his face, nor those of the two footmen stuck up behind. According to Mary, the wheels only made a faintly creaking noise as the coach swept by and turned off the avenue and drove right THROUGH the massive gates of the "berryin' ground."

"After *that*," Mary would say, "I never remember anything till I found myself in the scullery, with little Mary a-holding feathers to me nose."

Tom Connor went so far as to declare that he had actually driven in "the Death Coach."

He stated that he and two other "boys" were returning from the fair of Dundrum, about ten o'clock at night, as sober as his holiness himself; his two companions went into a cabin to get a light for their pipes, leaving him standing alone on the road, when what should come by but a splendid coach-and-four! Seeing Tom, the coachman pulled up sharp, and an elegant gentleman stepped out, with his hat in his hand. I quote Tom's description verbatim:

"'Would a sate home be any convainiance to you, Mr. Connor?' says he.

"'In troth an' it would,' says I, 'for I'm a mighty poor walker at the best of times, and it's four miles to the Cross of Gallow, if it is a yard.'

"'In with you thin,' says he.

"And in I got, never misdoubting that it was 'the Death Coach' I was going to take a ride in.

"In *van* second I found meself in the stable-yard of Gallow, just as if I had been dropped there by the fairies, wid the coach, and harses, and all standing fornint me, just as I got out.

“‘Good night, Mr. Connor,’ says the coachman, touching up the wheelers, ‘I’m going round to take some of the family out for an airing,’ pointing his whip towards the berryin’ ground; and with that, he turned the horses and drove out of the yard (an awkward corner even for a pair), the handiest and purtiest piece of driving I ever clapped my two eyes on.

“Whin I walked into the kitchen, I looked so mighty quare and unsteady, that says little Mary :

“‘Tom alannah, *whativer* ails you? You’re not yourself at all!’

“‘Sure I’m after taking a rowl in “the Death Coach,”’ says I. With that she let a screech you might hear in Kilcool. It’s herself can tell you the turn I give her; and the two boys that was wid me were bet up entirely to make out what became of me, and how it was I got home so long afore them.”

Whether it was “the Death Coach” or the bleak, bitter spring weather, grandfather showed no signs of getting better. The doctor declared that he would be all right again when the warm days came, but I think he scarcely meant what he said. One morning I was awoke by Miss Fluker, who was standing at my bedside, in her red flannel dressing-gown, with a very long face.

“Nora!” she said, in a hushed, low tone, “Nora, your grandfather has gone at last!”

“Dead!” I exclaimed, starting up.

“Yes, he was quite dead when Mary went in to give him his tea, at six o’clock this morning. He must have passed away almost in his sleep.”

Miss Fluker sat down on the edge of the bed, and we both commenced to cry, I profusely, as was my wont—Miss Fluker very moderately indeed.

I was very sorry for grandfather, though I had never been what I could call fond of him. I was too much in awe of him for that; but he was my only relation except Maurice, and somehow I felt utterly alone in the world now.

There was a certain stir in the house. The strange, wizened, little gentleman came down from Dublin, and

took everything into his own hands. He was grandfather's solicitor. The funeral was conducted with the utmost pomp and quite regardless of any expense. It was attended by crowds from far and near, and was considered the greatest and grandest funeral that had been seen in the country for twenty years. So said big Mary, with unconcealed triumph, as she brought me my dinner on a tray to the school-room. Miss Fluker remained downstairs, to preside over a handsome cold collation, that had been provided for mourners from afar. In her best black silk, and with her handkerchief to her eyes, she posed as a dear and valued friend of the family, and old Mr. Beresford's right hand !

I was obliged to descend to hear the will read, and I never felt so miserably shy and awkward in all my life, as when I made my way into the drawing-room, thronged with strangers—to me, but all old friends, according to their own showing, and benevolently anxious to hear how things were left.

Everything went to Maurice, excepting a thousand pounds, which grandfather had scraped together in some marvellous manner; that was left to his beloved granddaughter, Nora O'Neill, as well as all the lace and jewels belonging to her late grandmother, Mary Beresford—"the said jewels being heirlooms; but as my heir and nephew, Maurice Beresford, is under a solemn engagement to marry the aforementioned Nora O'Neill, I am in no way defrauding him of his just possessions." At this clause the eyes were turned to me as though worked by one spring. I felt myself becoming crimson to the roots of my hair, as I sat with my hands locked in my lap, and my eyes now glued to the floor. Mr. French was appointed my guardian until I was twenty-one years of age; and with a few trifling legacies to servants, the will was concluded, and the meeting broke up.

After a week or two we resumed our old monotonous life once more. We missed grandfather a good deal, although of late, he had been confined to his room. His vacant place at table, his empty chair by the fireside, were daily, silent reminders of "the poor old master," as the servants called him.

However, Miss Fluker soon promoted herself to his seat at table, and Snap appropriated his chair by the fireside;



and it would have been a bold man, or dog, who dared to question his tenancy—he presented a vision of flaming eyes and distended jaws, to anyone who came within what *he* considered a respectful distance. In the mornings, I read English history and classics with Miss Fluker, and practised an hour on an old rattle-trap, called by courtesy a piano. We dined at the barbarous but healthy hour of one, and my afternoons were altogether mine own—too much my own, if the truth were known. I had no confederates. Deb was away from home on a protracted visit to her grandmother, and I had no one to speak to, and no companion save Carlo.

Miss Fluker generally betook herself to Kilcool to see her friends the Misses Curry, two old maids that Rody and I had nicknamed “Plain Curry” and “Chicken Curry.” “Plain Curry,” or Miss Curry, was really very ugly. She wore, not the traditional wreath of roses, but a profuse bay front, with a well-defined black net parting, which was anything but a good match for her luxuriant gray eyebrows. She had a terrible cast in one eye, and had long ceased to think of herself as being either young or beautiful—a hallucination she still rigidly adhered to with regard to her sister Selina, or “Chicken Curry.”

She talked to her, and spoke of her, as if she were still a gay young thing in her teens; whereas Miss Selina was five-and-forty if she was an hour, although she affected a very juvenile style of dress, wore coquettish little hats, large false plaits, and quantities of pale blue ribbon encircling her skinny throat, and floating yards behind her. She bitterly bemoaned the scarcity of young people in the neighbourhood—young men especially—and really and truly considered herself, what her sister called her, “an unsophisticated girlish darling.”

Both Plain and Chicken were inveterate gossips, and knew to a spoonful what people were having for dinner from the mere smoke of their kitchen chimneys. Of course they were well up in all our family affairs, and could have passed a stiff examination on the amount of Maurice’s income, what he allowed for keeping up Gallow, etc. etc. And as for *my* proceedings, they were viewed with microscopic inspection. I did not get a new pair of shoes or have two helpings of pudding without their knowledge. I

knew that I formed a fertile topic of discussion, as Miss Fluker frequently enraged me by saying: "Miss Selina Curry thinks it *such* a pity you are so familiar with the people about the place—you should not be allowed to speak to them in her opinion;" or, "Miss Curry is quite concerned to see you hold yourself so badly; she noticed you particularly last Sunday in church; and she says, she never saw a girl of your age with so little manners;" or, "Both the Misses Curry think you have such a singularly ill-tempered expression," and other gratifying and flattering criticisms.

Miss Selina Curry and Miss Fluker were sworn friends. They kissed with effusion when they met, called each other "darling Selina" and dearest Sophia," and went into raptures over each other's dress and personal appearance. It was indeed a most touching sight to see them seated side by side on the ginger-coloured sofa that adorned the Curries' drawing-room, hand locked in hand.

Oh, those terrible teas, at which I have been a reluctant guest! Tea? Hot water, milk, and sugar, a few junks of mouldy sponge-cake, and a small plate of bread and butter. Nor was there "a feast of reason and a flow of soul" to make amends. Mr. French and Miss Selina, Miss Fluker and Miss Curry, talked "parish" and played whist; whilst I stared out of the window on to that lively prospect, the grass plot before the door, in summer—or amused myself with going over the sketches, annuals, shells, and rubbish of the Curry drawing-room, for the hundredth time,—if the festivity took place in winter.

At ten o'clock, some very weak negus was introduced on a black tray; and after many thanks "for a *delightful* evening" from Miss Fluker, and sundry osculations from our hostesses, we would wrap ourselves up and take our leave, escorted to the gates of Gallow by gallant Mr. French.

Mr. French was quite alone, and sometimes I would walk down to Kilcool and pay him a visit. He and his house, his wardrobe, and his "spirited" children were kept in order by an old family servant called Honour Casey, a square-faced elderly woman, with a warm temper and heart to correspond, who held the reins of government at the

Rectory, and between whom and the Misses Curry a feud had raged for years.

Mr. French devoted most of his leisure to the attempted resuscitation of the Irish language. To this end he slaved away for hours in his study, at times totally oblivious of dinner, and tea, and the outside world—till brought to his senses by Honour.

He had little or no authority over his son and daughter, unless roused, and carried out of himself, as was the case on "Mandarin Sunday." He did a great deal of good in an unobtrusive way, and never could say "no" to anyone. Consequently the Rectory kitchen was the rendezvous for half the vagrants in the county. He would meet them when out about the parish, listen sympathetically to their various stories, and send them up to the house to have their wants supplied—"tay and suggar, a bag of praties, or a lock of male" (meal), as the case might be.

Honour would receive the intruders with anything but open arms; but their unfailing answer—"The master sent us," "His reverence bid me give you a call"—silenced every objection.

"An' is it *another* can o' butter-milk the day, Peggy Mooney? 'Tis a cow to yourself you'll want." "And is it you *again*, Paddy Karney? 'Tis living here altogether you'll be nixt." "Troth and you have no shame nor decency, Kitty Maher, aitin' us out of house and home like this! Bad scram to you for beggars!"—would be some of her angry expostulations as she served these regular customers.

"'Tis little we mind ye, Honour honey; we all know your bark is worse nor your bite," the beggars would rejoin, as they shuddled themselves smilingly away.

During the summer holidays, I had a long letter from Maurice; a very nice letter too—no lecture, no advice—hoping I was well and happy, giving an amusing sketch of his Indian life, and winding up with messages and inquiries for each and all of the community.

I also received a very warm invitation from Deb's grandmother, Mrs. West, asking me to accompany her and her grandchildren to the seaside.

I eagerly accepted her offer, and went away from home for the first time in my life, escorted up to Dublin by Mr. French.

Mrs. West was a very clever, charming, elderly lady of what is now called "the old school." She took a fancy to me, and treated me almost like another grandchild, and my visit stretched out to six months instead of six weeks. Two months we spent at the seaside, where I enjoyed myself beyond description, and added swimming to my sparse catalogue of accomplishments; the other four months were passed in Dublin, where I had the benefit of singing lessons, and French and drawing classes at the Alexandra College. My wardrobe was modernised. My manners softened and toned down, thanks to Mrs. West's friendly advice and playful hints. I no longer whistled as I went about the house, nor sat with my elbows always on the table, nor burst into a room, as if I was pursued by a mad dog.

I acquired a taste for reading; had made acquaintance with Sir Walter Scott, Tennyson, and many other delightful people, and returned to Gallow vastly improved in mind and body. I found myself treated with a considerable accession of respect by the entire household. Big and little Mary no longer called me "Nora." Now I was "Miss Nora," or "Miss O'Neill." As Miss O'Neill, my manners were more assured and self-possessed—my wardrobe lent them dignity.

Someone very wisely says that "no one is beyond the influence of their clothes;" and certainly, in my neat-fitting black costume, and dainty Oxford shoes, I was by no means inclined, as of yore, for stalking through mud and bursting through bushes; and I felt that my dress involved a certain dignity of demeanour till now entirely foreign to my nature. I was conscious of being quite a stylish young lady, when I made my first formal call on the Curries, and I inwardly chuckled, when I mentally compared the awful dowdy figure I had often sat on their ginger-coloured ottoman to the vision of elegance, that I now flattered myself I presented to their bewildered eyes.

Miss Fluker by no means approved of her grub thus bursting into a butterfly. She repressed my new ideas by every means in her power; lectured me sharply on conceit, extravagance, and love of dress; consigned my best dress and buttoned boots to the limbo of a wardrobe in her own room, and did her best to make me look as uncouth and

countrified as ever. But I rebelled stoutly, and refused to let down my hair, and take up my frocks, and found myself entering upon a new lease of a stronger and more inveterate dislike than ever to Sophia Fluker. She little knew, and as little cared, how severely I mentally criticised her. She was a fixture at Gallow till I was twenty years of age, and she did not trouble her head to study appearances, as far as I was concerned. But indeed her violent temper, her indolence, her meanness, and her greediness were only too patent to the whole household. I never knew such a woman for tea; tea aroused her from her slumbers, tea awaited her at breakfast, tea was served at five o'clock, and various illegitimate cups of tea might be seen going upstairs at all sorts of odd hours. She invariably had a share in the *kitchen* tea, a most unwarrantable black-mail, as I know she stinted big and little Mary in their tea and sugar money, although she had a handsome allowance from Maurice. I also know, that she made a fine privy purse out of her pickings and parings;—nothing could be plainer than our fare (indeed I might say humble, as far as I was concerned); and the way she bargained away the milk, eggs, butter, and vegetables would have reflected credit on a Jew! Our staple food was fowl; fowl roast, and fowl boiled, fowl minced or fricasseed, fowl hot, and fowl cold. Needless to state that the Kilcool butcher held us in deserved disdain.

“Faix, Miss Nora,” exclaimed big Mary one day as she contemptuously dashed the dinner on the table, “I wonder you’re not afraid the feathers will grow out of you; ye ought to be ashamed to look a fowl in the face!”

## CHAPTER XI.

### GRANDFATHER'S BARGAIN.

Oh, many a shaft at random sent,  
Finds mark the archer little meant,  
*Scott: "Lord of the Isles."*

To shake off dull sloth and early rise, was no effort to me. I was always an early bird, and had the privilege of opening the post-bag in consequence. It rarely ever contained anything for Miss O'Neill. Deb was my only correspondent, and a very bad one too. In turning over the letters one morning, about two months after my return home, I found to my great amazement, a thin foreign envelope, half covered with green and blue stamps, addressed to me in an old-fashioned Italian hand.

"Who in the world could it be from?" I thought, nervously tearing it open. It ran as follows:

MULKAPORE, *June 5th.*

"MY DEAR NIECE,

"I have heard of the death of your grandfather, Mr. Beresford of Gallow, and am sorry to learn, that he has made no provision for you, but has left you absolutely penniless, living on the bounty of his heir. I know all these particulars are facts. Your grandfather's solicitor is my informant. Perhaps you have never heard of me: I am your own aunt—your father's sister. I came out to India years before you were born. My husband, Colonel Neville, is the cantonment magistrate at Mulkapore, a very healthy station, so I have no hesitation in asking you to come out at once, and make your home with us. We have no children, and you shall be as our daughter, and take our name. Write to me by return mail, and say that you are coming, and your uncle will lodge the money for your

outfit and passage at Grindlay's without delay. The sooner you can start, the better we shall be pleased.

"As long as your grandfather lived, we naturally held aloof from you, but now that he has gone, and has left you unprovided for, it seems to me that your natural home is with us—your nearest of kin, who will gladly welcome you as a daughter, and do all in their power to make you happy.

"I remain, your affectionate aunt,  
"MARGARET NEVILLE."

I read this letter over two or three times before I quite took in its meaning—plain enough although it was. After sitting before the fire for nearly half-an-hour buried in profound reflection, I made up my mind to keep the news of my new-found relatives to myself (for the present, at any rate); to say nothing to Miss Fluker, who would retail the information to the Misses Curry, as a choice morsel of news, but who would feel no real interest whatever in the matter. I kept my secret—I had, unfortunately, an undeveloped talent for a certain kind of silence—and wrote to my aunt the following mail, thanking her for her letter, and telling her that I was provided with a home, and had no wish to leave Gallow; but that I hoped to see her some day, and begged that she would not lose sight of me again, as I was only too glad to sign myself her affectionate niece, Nora O'Neill.

Since I had returned from Dublin I observed that Mr. French very frequently found his way up to Gallow! I remarked upon his constant calls, quite unsuspectingly to Miss Fluker, declaring that he was becoming quite sociable, and fond of ladies' society. All the answer she vouchsafed me, was a superior smile, and gradual drooping of the eyelids; from which I inferred, that these parochial visits were *not* the extraordinary novelty that I imagined!

He professed to be anxious to know how I was getting on, and to be the bearer of various messages from Rody and Deb; but I did not flatter myself that the visits were wholly for me. I observed that whenever his thin black-coated figure was seen coming up the avenue, Miss Fluker would rush to the swing-door, at the top of the kitchen stairs, and deliver orders for a liberal meal. Then she

would fly up to her own room, and hastily don her blue silk gown, and best collar, and cuffs. She was a rapid dresser; for Mr. French would hardly have relieved himself of his hat and stick, before she would come sailing into the room, all smiles and surprise, with outstretched hands and beaming countenance. The way in which she could change her face and manner was simply marvellous! She put off her usual dictatorial, overbearing expression, along with her old brown merino, and left it upstairs.

"Dear Mr. French, so good of you to come! so kind of you to take pity on us, especially as your time is so valuable. Have you brought me up that pamphlet of yours you promised to let me see? I have been thinking of *nothing else*, ever since you told me about it!" she would say, moving her chair closer to him, and looking at him rapturously. Then, from an obscure pocket, Mr. French—credulous Mr. French—would produce a blue-backed treatise on the defunct Irish tongue, and hand it over to his fair friend, who would receive it with almost religious reverence, and commence to discuss this animating subject with well-feigned enthusiasm. Within half-an-hour after Mr. French's arrival, tea generally made its appearance—quite a little impromptu meal! Hot cakes, fried ham, buttered toast, preserves, and honey. No wonder Mr. French was fond of coming up to Gallow! To do him justice, I do not think the prospect of a "high tea" was the chief attraction. His own home was empty and lonely; at Gallow he was received with enthusiasm—a perennial welcome awaited him; he was deferred to, courted, and made much of.

Men are but mortal, and I am sure it was sweet—even to elderly, hatchet-faced Mr. French—to know "there was an eye that marked his coming and looked brighter when he came." To have Miss Fluker, looking smiling, solicitous, and sweet, hanging on his words, and consulting him about the smallest matter connected with the place or *me*, was not a little flattering to his *amour-propre*. I was discussed as if I were not present, and Miss Fluker always alluded to me as "her special treasure," and her "dear young friend and companion."

Mr. French's visits were of a bi-weekly occurrence all winter and spring. Rody was preparing for the Army; and Deb was with her grandmother at Torquay, as Mrs. West



had been ordered to the South of England on account of her health. Consequently, our Rector fell back on Gallow as some relief to his loneliness. Each week he and Miss Fluker became more friendly and confidential. She consulted him about the servants, about her little investments, and, in short, on every possible subject.

Gallow, with the exception of the garden, was let up to the hall door. We had no horses, no trap of any kind; two cows, and an ancient donkey for drawing turf, were all our livestock; and yet, out of these meagre materials, Miss Fluker made enormous capital for "consultation."

"One of the cows was sick—would Mr. French come and look at her?" "The cattle on the land were breaking down the young plantations—she would like to show him the damage they had done!" Thus, *tête-à-tête* strolls ensued, for I had not the hardihood to thrust my society upon them. Young as I was, I had already heard the proverb, "Two is company," etc., and, young as I was, I could see very plainly that Miss Fluker intended to *marry* Mr. French. She talked to him and flattered him in a manner that completely captivated my deluded guardian, whilst I looked on an indignant and passive spectator, seeing only too clearly the destiny that awaited him. I had given Deb several hints of the state of affairs, and actually gone so far as to set before her what even my inexperienced eye saw looming in the distance; but it was not of the slightest use, my intelligence was laughed to scorn, and replied to by sheets of amusing nonsense.

Spring had given place to summer, and still my prophecy remained unfulfilled, but now the least intelligent looker-on could see that affairs were rapidly approaching a crisis.

"Faix it will be a match," said big Mary, looking over my shoulder out of the dining-room window, as I stood watching the pair walking down the avenue, *en route* to inspect the lodge chimney, accompanied by Snap, who was taking his evening run—on three legs, with the fourth economically tucked up. "He hasn't a chance with her, the schaming——"

"Hush, Mary, don't!" I expostulated hastily.

"Well, Miss Nora, I *won't*," she answered indignantly; "but oh, holy fly!! what will Miss Deb say? *She won't* thank you for the stepmother she's getting."

I stood in the window in silence, whilst Mary made a great clatter among the tea-things, and mentally resolved to write to Deb the very next day and to tell her that she *must* come home. But my good intentions came too late; my meditations, which lasted long, were interrupted by the entrance of Miss Fluker, with visible triumph in her gait and aspect!

Tossing her hat off, she stood leaning against the table, looking at me with a malicious smile on her face. I knew what was coming perfectly.

"Well!" she said at last.

"Well?" I repeated, in a tone of defiance I found it impossible to suppress.

"Mr. French proposed for me this evening, and I have accepted him."

I was sitting with my back to the light, and she strove in vain to see my face—it was quite in the shadow, whereas the full glare of the setting sun illuminated her features, radiant with exultation.

"Have you nothing to say?" she asked after a pause.

"*Nothing!*" I answered pointedly.

She was manifestly disappointed, I am certain. She expected expostulation, argument, anger—in short, "a scene." After a moment's silence, she walked over to her favourite armchair, into which she cast herself with a long, contented sigh, as of one whose labour is accomplished; and, indeed, it had been a tedious business. For nearly a year, Mr. French had visited at Gallow before he succumbed; he had had a year's grace. Now he had spoken, it was all over with him, poor man! After a time, lights were brought in, and Miss Fluker set her desk on the table, and commenced to scribble off a letter at railroad speed. I watched her intently; a smile, she did not attempt to restrain, decked her thin red lips, as she wrote rapidly.

She read over the first two pages, and then jumped up.

"After all," she exclaimed, "I will go myself."

"Go where?" I asked brusquely.

"Just down to Kilcool to tell the Curries. It's a fine night, and they will be so pleased," she added emphatically, as she fussed about, seeking her hat and gloves.

I watched her hurrying down the avenue, and then I went out and sat on the steps with my elbows on my knees,

and wondered at Mr. French, and at what Rody and Deb would say, and what was to become of *me*. As the evening became cool and chill, I took my candle and went to bed, still wondering.

As far as Mrs. West and Deb were concerned, my mind was soon set at rest. Mrs. West's indignation was unbounded. She refused to allow Deb to return to Kilcool, a refusal that sat very lightly on Miss Flucker—if Mrs. West liked to take her stepdaughter off her hands, so much the better—and wholly declined to have anything to say to her son-in-law's second choice, having imbibed a rooted aversion to her, during a short visit she had paid to the Rectory two years previously.

It was settled that I was to step into Deb's shoes and take her place at home, and Gallow was to be completely shut up. Thus much was imparted to me by Mr. French himself. The engagement was publicly announced (the Misses Curry having proved themselves better than any advertisement), and the fact was immediately known all over the country, far and wide.

Mr. French, of course, now spent more time than ever at Gallow, and I had my mornings as well as my afternoons entirely to myself. I wandered aimlessly about the gardens, the fields, and the bog. A seat on a stile, leading to the latter, was a favourite resort of mine, with a book in my lap, and a long vista of short grass, clumps of golden furze-bushes, and a wide sea of purple heather stretching far away to the very edge of the horizon. Here I would spend whole happy, solitary afternoons, undisturbed by aught save the grouse, and the curlew. One evening, I was interrupted by Sweetlips, who, with ass and car, was bringing up a load of bog stuff for the garden.

"Is it there you are, Miss Nora?" he growled, "perched like a crow on a gate."

"It is, Sweetlips," I answered cheerfully.

"It's not much lessons you have to do now, by all accounts," he remarked sarcastically.

"I'm getting too old for lessons, am I not, Sweetlips?" I said, jumping lightly down and escorting the ass and car, for lack of something else to do.

"Begorra, I'm misdoubting 'tis but little you know for

your years," returned Sweetlips rudely. "'Twas your mother, Miss Beresford, that was the elegant scholar, the learned young lady!"

"How do you know that *I'm* not a learned young lady too?" I asked smilingly.

"Faith, and it would be hard for you; sure you were always galivanting and tearing mad about the place till just the other day! 'Tis little schooling *you* know, I'm thinking," he concluded emphatically, spitting on the palms of his hands, and commencing to load the donkey car with immense energy.

After working away for some minutes, he paused, and surveying me with a meditative frown, wheezed out:

"See now, what's to be done with *you*, Miss Nora, bates me entirely."

Whereupon, in a few terse sentences, I told him it had been settled that I was to live in Kilcool, and that Gallow was to be shut up. When he heard of this latter arrangement, his rage was unbounded; his irritability developed from incredulous crossness into outspoken passion; he could hardly find words to express himself; he favoured me with his opinion, gratis, of "schamers;" and, as he denounced Mr. French and his folly, he became absolutely eloquent. He hated Miss Fluker with a cordial dislike; he held her in profound contempt. His sentiments were probably based on monetary transactions, with regard to fruit and vegetables. Any way, for once, he relieved his mind; he told me what he thought of her and her "goings on." Seeing that he was in an exceeding bad humour, and not caring to stay and hear him abusing my governess (little as I liked her), I made some kind of remonstrance, and strolled away; but, as I walked off, with my book under my arm, I could still hear Sweetlips raging away to himself, and the epithets, "no lady," and "old fool," were carried to my ears by the evening breeze.

I soon discovered a comfortable seat, and my book was so interesting that I quite forgot the flight of time; and it was long past six o'clock when I entered the dining-room—late for tea.

I found Miss Fluker graciously dispensing hospitality to the two Misses Curry, presiding over a dainty little meal, such as her soul loved. They had evidently been talking

of *me*, I could see, for the conversation suddenly subsided from an animated buzz to a dead silence, as I entered; and various highly-intelligent glances were mutually interchanged. Politely greeting the two lady guests, I took my seat at the table, and looked expectantly for a cup of tea.

"Nora," said Miss Fluker authoritatively, "the next time you are so unpunctual I shall send you straight to bed."

To this pleasant remark I made no answer, but, reaching for the loaf, began to cut myself some bread and butter. I was too late for the hot cakes and ham.

"Did you hear me, miss?" she exclaimed, raising her voice.

"Yes, Miss Fluker, I heard you," I replied. I felt all there were exchanging looks; I felt the hot Beresford blood mounting to my face; I felt that I was seventeen, and no longer a child, and no longer disposed to be treated as one.

"Keep your temper," she said, glaring at me angrily, "your face is at this moment scarlet with passion."

I raised my eyes and glanced at her incredulously.

"Don't *dare* to look at me like that, you insolent girl!" she cried with unusual animus in her aspect.

I knew that I was being baited for the amusement of the Misses Curry, and I was resolved to afford no sport; so with an extraordinary effort I restrained my ever-ready tongue, and applied myself to my teacup. But I was not to escape. After a little desultory conversation about the price of black silks and sealskin jackets with the Misses Curry, Miss Fluker again addressed me:

"I have been now engaged nearly two months," she began in a high, acrid tone, "and it is a curious thing, that of all my many friends and acquaintances, the only one who has not wished me joy is *you*, Nora! The Misses Curry," with a comprehensive wave of her buttered toast, "were just saying how extraordinary it was"—and a great deal more besides—"when you came in. It does not meet with your approval perhaps?" with bitter irony.

I made no answer—silence is golden.

"Why, may I ask? How is it that we have unfortunately failed to secure your approbation?" with another sneer.

"I prefer not telling you, Miss Fluker, at any rate not at present," I replied quietly, "my opinion is of no consequence."

"I insist on an answer to my question," she returned, drumming rapidly on the tray with her teaspoon. "Do you hear?" she proceeded; "either answer me this instant, or leave the room. I *will* be obeyed, and not defied by you, you great, gawky, impertinent girl!"

This was the last straw on the camel's back. I could restrain myself no longer.

"I shall certainly *not* leave the room," I boldly replied, "and I will answer your question, since that is the only other alternative, and you evidently think so much of *my* opinion."

"Do you hear her, Selina?" said Miss Fluker, appealing to her friend impressively.

My heart was beating fast, and I held my trembling hands tightly clasped in my lap. I knew that I stood one against three, but I was determined to strike a blow for truth, and, if possible, for freedom.

"I think," I said, in a low, but perfectly distinct tone, "that it is a wretched marriage for Mr. French."

"Oh, really; dear me, you don't mean to say so!" retorted Miss Fluker, struggling to smile superior, but in reality almost hysterical with passion.

"Well, upon my word," chorus of Curries in a key of consternation.

"Yes," I proceeded, warming with the subject; "and everyone, far and near, thinks the same."

"It is a *lie*!" cried Miss Fluker hoarsely; "utterly false, you mean, spiteful, untruthful girl," glaring at me in a manner fearful to witness, as she piled these choice epithets on my unprotected head. "At any rate," she went on, "Mr. French proposed for *me* of his own accord, and of his own free will; and no one will deny the fact," with great emphasis, and standing up to make the assertion.

It struck me that I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and relieve my mind, once for all.

"I am not so sure of that," I retorted foolishly.

"What!" she screamed, springing towards me and seizing me by the shoulder, and shaking me backwards and forwards like a rat, "say that again!"

My courage had now risen to rashness. I said it again. "Impertinent minx!" still shaking me, and wholly beside herself with passion. "You to dare to say such a thing to *me*, when all the world knows how Maurice Beresford, poor boy, was *forced* to promise to marry *you*!"

"Explain yourself! What do you mean?" I cried, suddenly wrenching myself from her grasp.

"When you were left a *beggar*," she continued excitedly, shaking a furious finger in my face, "your grandfather told Maurice that he must stop his mother's allowance, all she had in the world, in order to save something for you, unless Maurice agreed to marry you. He had *no* choice; he could not let his mother starve, and he agreed. But let me tell you that he *hates* you! detests you!" with venomous emphasis. "He did all in his power to get out of it. He even offered half of Gallow; but it was no use. He was forced to make a solemn promise to marry his beggar cousin; and you to dare to hint to *me* that *I* have angled for Mr. French—Mr. French, who has been at my feet for the last five years!"

Here she paused, completely breathless. It was now my turn to speak.

"I suppose Mr. French told you all this?" I asked, steadying myself by the back of a chair, and bringing out each word with difficulty. My question had the effect of an electric shock. In her passion she had evidently forgotten that Mr. French had confided a family secret to her keeping. Oh, weak Mr. French! to have confided in her! and now she had told *me*, of all people the last to whose ears it should have come! However, the deed was done; she had burned her boats! No glossing over, no explanation could recall the words that, in a moment of unbridled passion, she had suffered to escape from her lips. I could see a certain amount of consternation depicted in her countenance, as she answered with biting emphasis:

"Never mind *who* told me, it is the truth."

"No, it is not much matter," I returned in a low and trembling voice that I vainly endeavoured to steady, as I almost unconsciously resumed my seat, and rested my head on my hand.

The blow to my pride, and to my feelings, had been so heavy, and so sudden, that for some moments I felt com-

pletely stunned. I sat motionless before my untasted tea and bread and butter, morally overwhelmed. I dared not even raise my eyes, so shattered was my self-respect. At length Miss Selina Curry ventured to bridge over the awful silence with some bald, commonplace remark, made in a lofty, company-tone of voice, and the entrance of big Mary with a fresh consignment of hot cakes created what seemed to me a heaven-sent diversion. I made one grand supreme effort, and pushing back my chair, rushed precipitately out of the room, leaving Miss Fluker completely mistress of the field—sitting behind the tea-urn, her face actually mottled with passion—and the two Misses Curry looking benevolently concerned and sympathetically indignant! I am quite certain that they enjoyed the whole scene with the gusto of professional gossips. A real fracas was an unexpected treat, and to see two combatants descend to the arena before their very eyes was a rarely-prized mental refreshment.

When I had gained the retirement of my own apartment, I slammed and locked the door, and, throwing myself on my bed, gave way to a torrent of tears—tears of anger and mortification, tears of wounded pride and passion—but very, very bitter tears all the same.

How blind I had been not to have recognised my position from the first—not to have seen that Maurice was an unwilling instrument in grandfather's hands. I had taken everything for granted, lived on at Gallow as if it were as much my home as ever! I loved the old place dearly, my stunted, shrivelled family affections had been repressed or put aside by grandfather, and I had invested them largely in stones and mortar, trees and grass.

I regarded Gallow and its surroundings with a firm, faithful, and foolish regard. But it belonged to Maurice, every stone, every acre—nay, the very dress I wore, the meal I had fled from, were provided and paid for by him, and I had accepted all benefits without the smallest misgivings, and as my undoubted right.

Oh, miserable, shameless girl!—a girl of seventeen, with the common-sense, and worldly wisdom, and happy-go-lucky confidence in her surroundings of a child of twelve—I had never realised that I was one day to become Mrs. Beresford



of Gallow. I put the idea of being engaged to Maurice in an out-of-the-way corner of my brain, and rarely brought it forth—it would never come to anything, I felt certain: it was preposterous, impracticable, and incredible.

At last the veil had been torn from my eyes; now I beheld my true position with the most appalling distinctness; now, I could easily understand grandfather's anxiety to save, to hoard money—it was for *me*. Now, I readily interpreted the cause of Maurice's pale, averted face, that dim autumn evening just three years ago—I was the cause of that also.

My mind was in a perfect chaos as after a while I roused myself, and sat on the edge of my bed with my head buried in my hands; but even so, and in the dark, hot blushes raced up to the very roots of my hair, as I thought of grandfather's bargain.

"Hates you! detests you! forced to marry his pauper cousin, to save his mother from starvation"—these sentences kept ringing in my ears till my brain felt downright giddy. There was no sleep for me that night—actually none for *me*, who might have gained a medal among the Seven Sleepers. My heart beat so fast, and in such a wearisome little pat, pat, pat, that it gave me no rest; and my mind, generally so empty and so bare, was thronged with visions of the past and future. I watched the night darken in, the stars appear and fade—I counted the hours struck by the cracked old clock in the hall. I longed feverishly for daybreak, and with the first streaks of dawn was alert and afoot. I dressed myself and stole down the stairs, rousing Snap from his snores on the mat at grandfather's door; and, noiselessly leaving the house, I paced the garden, the avenue, the wet paths through the fields for three mortal hours, till it was time to set off to Kilcool. I knew that Mr. French was an early riser, and that I was sure of a *tête-à-tête* with him by calling before breakfast.

I found Honour on her knees washing out the Rectory hall as I entered, and told her that I wished to see her master at once. Though well accustomed to my vagaries, this early visit was something quite new. Moreover, Honour was a little wee bit cross, like many people when the day is young.

"Oh, of course it's at wance! 'Tis always immadiately,

or at wance with *you*. Whatever has come to you now? You must just wait, Miss Nora, and let the master ate his breakfast in peace," she said querulously.

"I can't and *won't*!" was my polite announcement. "I have something most particular that I must speak about this very minute."

"Well, here then, I suppose you will just *have* to go in," said Honour peevishly, wiping down her wet arms as she rose from her knees. "I wish you were married"—her favourite anathema—"that I do!" she added, as, flinging open the dining-room door, she ushered me into the presence of my guardian. He was seated at the breakfast table in a roomy arm-chair; an open treatise of some kind, propped up against the milk-jug, was dividing his attention with his frugal meal. He paused in the act of decapitating his second egg as I walked into the room, thus announced: "Miss Nora says she *will* see ye. There's no withstanding her!"

He was unfeignedly surprised at my visit, and more surprised still when he learnt my errand! I had rehearsed what I wished to say over and over again, as I paced the avenue, and walked down to Kilcool; so that I was at no loss for words when I drew a chair to the table, and, leaning both my elbows on it to steady myself, asked him to tell *me*, as he would Deb in a like case, "if it was true that I was a pauper, entirely dependent on Maurice Beresford, and that he had been *forced* to promise me a home and to marry me, in order to save his mother from want?"

These questions mightily confounded my good guardian.

"Who told you all this?" he asked, reddening visibly, and evidently much confused.

"Miss Fluker, last night, in the presence of the Misses Curry!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" he exclaimed fretfully, pushing his egg away as if it were an importunate petitioner.

"Then it is *true*, Mr. French?" I asked brusquely, looking him straight in the face. "You are a clergyman, and of *course* you would not deceive me."

"Ye-es, it's true in a way," he replied reluctantly. "Your grandfather managed it, in fact arranged the whole business. But Maurice Beresford is not averse to the match *now*. He is quite reconciled to the idea; he sees that it is

all for the best. I can show you his letters. He speaks of you most kindly," returned Mr. French quite volubly. "Make your mind perfectly easy, Nora," he went on soothingly, "you are much too young to think of marriage or Maurice Beresford.—All in good time! All in good time!" he concluded with mild facetiousness.

"And *do* you suppose for an instant that I mean to marry him?" I asked, jumping to my feet, my face aflame with passion. "You treat me too much as a foolish child, Mr. French! I have lived far too long in ignorance of my true position. I am a pauper, as Miss Flucker very truly said—a beggar; but, now that I know *all*, a beggar too proud to marry Maurice Beresford!"

"Nora, you are talking like a play-actress. Have you taken leave of your senses?" demanded Mr. French angrily.

"I have not!" I exclaimed forcibly; "and I tell you distinctly, Mr. French, that I would rather die—yes, *die*—than marry my cousin Maurice—*now*" (as much as to say, 'make a note of *that*'), "and you may tell him so," I added recklessly.

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. French, leaning back in his chair, and looking at me helplessly.

After a moment's silent survey of his untractable ward he plucked up a little courage, and his blank amazement found words.

"You need not be so violent, Nora," he expostulated mildly.

"If *you* had been bargained away as I have been you would be violent yourself," I rejoined warmly.

"Sit down, sit down and calm yourself, and we will talk it all over quietly," he said, waving me towards a chair.

I condescended to be seated once more; and with my hat in my lap and eyes fixed on his face, awaited his pleasure in silence.

"It was very ill-advised and indiscreet to have mentioned the subject to you at all," he began, in the same monotonous tone with which he commenced his sermons.

"Not at all," I interrupted; "I am glad I know—it was a kindness to tell me, though not intended as such."

"Do you *really* think that Maurice Beresford wished to

marry you of his own free will?" he pursued slowly, and gazing into my face with searching scrutiny.

"Of course I did!" I answered promptly, "and I often wondered at his choice."

"These family arrangements are of common occurrence," he went on, "and if there *is* a little reluctance to them at first it soon passes off, and all turns out happily in the end."

"There will be no *end* to our arrangement as you call it, for the very good reason that there will be no beginning. I shall write and tell Maurice of my discovery, and that I would sooner be torn in pieces than marry him."

"I forbid you to do anything of the sort," exclaimed Mr. French, half rising in his chair.

"I shall do it all the same," I answered firmly. "I am seventeen, and I know my own mind; why, my grandmother was *married* at my age. I am no longer a child—I am grown up," I added impressively.

"Dear, dear, dear! I don't know *what* I am to do with you, Nora. You really must obey me; what will Miss Flucker say when she hears all this?" regarding me with visible uneasiness.

"I don't care two straws what Miss Flucker says," I observed defiantly. "She shook me and called me all kinds of names last evening, and she shall certainly apologise to me for her rudeness before I ever speak to her again."

"Well, well, well! the world seems to be turned upside down this morning," said Mr. French, leaning back in his chair and surveying me blankly. "You want to break off your engagement, you demand an apology from your governess—what *next*?" he asked with mild irony.

"I am going to leave Gallow," I answered promptly; "that will be the next thing."

"Where are you going to, if I may presume to enquire?"

"Out into the world to seek my fortune."

"She is mad!" he muttered; "stark, staring mad. But there has never been insanity in the family," he added reflectively, and gazing at me with a most critical eye.

"I am not a bit mad *now*, but I would go out of my senses if I stayed at Gallow. I shall go and live with some of my father's people."

"Eh?"

I repeated what I had said.

"After you are one-and-twenty you may go to Jericho if you like," said my guardian angrily; "but until then you are my ward, and you will stay under my roof. I have given my promise to your grandfather and your cousin, and I mean to keep it," he concluded with more firmness than I believed he possessed. It was a good thing to exercise it, for his wife would test his powers in that line shortly.

"Do you mean to keep me with you against my will?" I asked with blazing eyes.

"Certainly I do! A girl in her teens has no business to *have* a will. I will keep you under my own eye till Maurice Beresford comes to relieve me of my charge. I distinctly forbid you to think of breaking off your engagement. Understand me, Nora, I am only acting for your good."

"And will you not allow me to go to my father's relations? I shall be far happier with them, and *you* will be relieved from a load of responsibility," opening, as I imagined, a tempting vista.

"I will not *hear* of it," he answered irritably. "Your father's relations have nothing to say to you, if any exist. You have surprised me very much, Nora—painfully surprised me. Your independence must be curbed. I can *now* understand what Miss Fluker means by your ungovernable temper. When you come to live here under my own roof, I hope you will learn how to restrain yourself, and endeavour to become as amiable, as Christian, and as sweet-tempered as your kind good governess."

## CHAPTER XII.

### GOOD-BYE, GALLOW !

A lucky chance, that oft decides the fate of mighty monarchs.  
*Thompson.*

I GAINED nothing by my visit to Kilcool, save that I fell "full fathom five" in the opinion of Mr. French, who had hitherto looked on me as a harmless, wild, impetuous child. Now I seemed to him an audacious, violent, ill-tempered young woman. Miss Fluker stigmatised my visit as "an abominable act of forwardness," and just what she would have "expected from a girl so completely lost to all sense of truth, propriety, and good feeling."

I cull these flowers of speech from many others, all of the same hue, and all showered on me with a liberal hand by my extremely irate governess. She pursued me with more than Corsican vengeance, and my life was becoming unbearable. She worried me and bullied me from morning till night. I worked myself, or rather, she worked me, into such a nervous state that her very step overhead or on the stairs made me tremble, while her sudden entrance into a room caused me to start violently.

Supported by Mr. French, as by a strong buttress, she was more completely my mistress than ever. She had *carte blanche* from my guardian to keep me in order, and to curb my spirit—a task she undertook with extraordinary zeal. Here was a case in which duty and inclination for once walked hand in hand.

I endured in silence, submitting myself to my pastors and masters with, had they but known how to read the signs of the times, ominous obedience. I knew that the longest lane has a turning, and that my lane was approaching the public highway.

The morning of my interview with Mr. French I had

returned home with weary exhausted footsteps, not having tasted a morsel for nearly twenty hours ; but a large hunch of brown bread and a cup of milk, surreptitiously procured from big Mary, had renewed my flagging energies. I met Miss Fluker face to face in the hall ; a sudden elevation of her nose, and a general stiffening of her demeanour, had been the only notice she vouchsafed me, although both she and I knew that I richly deserved a first-rate scolding for my non-appearance at the breakfast-table. She nevertheless stayed her tongue, for she felt that she had said quite enough, if not *too* much, the previous evening.

I passed up to the now deserted, battered, ink-stained school-room, and dragging out my old mahogany desk (that might almost claim to be a piece of furniture), I sat down to write three letters. "Strike while the iron is hot," "Delays are dangerous," and "Who hesitates is lost," were all mottoes very much to my taste ; so, selecting a sheet of pea-green foreign paper, without a moment's hesitation I commenced to write a fiery, not to say furious, letter to my cousin Maurice. It mattered not that I took the most audacious liberties with Lindley Murray as I warmed to my work ; if I conveyed my meaning quite plainly and thoroughly I did not care a fig. I told him "that I had discovered the bargain grandfather had made on my behalf, and that I declined MY share in it, with many thanks"—here I was endeavouring to be sarcastic. Thinking that this was hardly sufficiently forcible, I added "that I would rather drown myself in the pond in the garden, rather die twice over, than marry him under *any* circumstances ; that I had hitherto been living on his charity, but that I now begged to relieve him of the encumbrance, as I was about to leave Gallow for ever, and that as long as he lived, he might be very certain that he would never again see or hear of Nora O'Neill."

The last peroration struck me as being superb, and particularly fine and high-sounding, and I now remember that I read it over more than once, and dwelt on it with no small complacency. Take the letter all in all, it was rather a startling communication for a young man to receive. I should like to have been an intelligent fly on the wall when Maurice was deep in its perusal.

My next letter was to my aunt, from whom I had heard some time previously, repeating her invitation, and

telling me that their home was always mine, and that a line at any time to their agents in Liverpool would be sufficient to procure me a passage and an outfit. This arrangement fitted in admirably with my present dilemma. I wrote to her, accepting her invitation, and telling her that I was now determined to leave Gallow, and leave it without delay, for reasons I would explain when we met. I sent her a most incoherent, rambling communication, lucid on one point only, viz that I was going to make my home with her, to take her name, and to be her adopted daughter, and that I was venturing this step entirely on my own responsibility.

The third effusion was a short note to the shipping agents, enclosing my aunt's last letter, and informing them, that I purposed proceeding to India about the last week in September. I fixed on this date, as I knew that Mr. French and Miss Fluker intended going about that time to a large auction at the other end of the county. They were to be the guests of a brother clergyman, and would be absent, oh joy! for at least two days. When I had finished my correspondence, a great load seemed to be lifted from my mind. I closed my desk, washed my inky fingers, and, putting on my hat—for I was a young woman who did nothing by halves—I carried the letters down to the village, and posted them with my own hands. Then I sat down, so to speak, to await events.

Morning after morning I emptied the letter-bag with an eager hand; but at last it came, the looked-for missive from Liverpool. I knew its blue envelope the instant I saw it, and putting it in my pocket I sallied forth to read it alone. It was short, concise, and very much to the point, and it simply notified that my passage had been secured in the *Corunna*, sailing from Liverpool to Bombay on the 29th of September—in *three weeks'* time. My heart beat very fast at the thought, as I read over my news that lovely autumn morning perched on my favourite stile. I began to make small preparations for departure. I drew all the remainder of my "sheep money" (eleven pounds ten shillings) out of the Post-office Savings Bank. Grandfather gave me a lamb every year, which I kept and sold when it was fat; hence my savings. I gradually and tearfully took leave of all my haunts, as the time for leaving them came round. The day before the auction was a busy



one with me. Latterly I had been so silent and discreet that I was left very much to myself, and I made good use of my leisure; I packed my meagre wardrobe—a goodly supply of underlinen made by my own fingers, my mother’s miniature, a few favourite books, my old habit and whip. My worldly belongings were not difficult of transportation. Then I took a solemn farewell of Patsey and Sweetlips. I went to their cottages after tea and told them I was going away, but I could not tell them *where*; and that I would write to them, and send them presents. Sweetlips was both amazed and displeased. He vowed “he would go straight and tell on me unless I gave up the name of the people to whom I was going, and told him all about it.” On this point he was inexorable.

Having sworn him to masonic secrecy, I related my prospects, showed him my aunt’s letter, and appeased his fears.

“The last of the old family, and going away! Well, ’tis no place for the likes of you now. But, Miss Nora darlin’, it’s a terrible thing for a young slip of a girl like you to be going out in the world in this way—across the says too! It’s drowned ye’ll be, and getting your throat cut among all thim black nagurs besides,” he observed impressively.

“No fear, Sweetlips; lots of people go to India and come home safe and sound.”

“Ay,” suddenly brightening up. “True fer yez! Sure, now I think of it, Mr. Maurice is out there! You’re going out to the same country,” with a knowing look for which I could have beaten him, “and you’ll make the match from your uncle’s house, where, no doubt, he’ll be calling” (as if India was a village), “and you’ll come home, the two of you together, and keep up Gallow in the rale old style.”

“*Never!*” I almost shrieked. “Mr. Maurice may keep up what style he likes, but not with *me*.”

“See now, don’t be talkin’ nonsense; who else would it be with? Sure, aren’t ye going *afther* him?” returned Sweetlips resolutely. There was not the smallest use in arguing with him, I knew from *years* of experience, so I at once bid him farewell. He went so far as to kiss my hand and bless me. Poor Sweetlips, I always knew his bark was worse than his bite. But who would have believed that we would have parted in *tears*?

"Never fear, Miss Nora, but that I'll keep all straight, and have everything in elegant order agin you and Mr. Maurice come home," were his last words, cheerfully shouted after me, as I ran down the little pathway from his door.

At daybreak next morning, Miss Fluker left Gallow on the Rectory jaunting-car. I was down in time to see her start, warmly wrapped up by Mr. French's own attentive hands, and with the hood of her waterproof over her head. She little knew what a long farewell it was to be, as she waved her umbrella in adieu. She never dreamt that my clothes were packed; the twig, driven by Dan, awaiting me in the yard; and that soon the seas would roll between Nora O'Neill and Gallow. Her thoughts were naturally running on her probable purchases—a pair of plated side-dishes, a new maroon velvet sofa, and two armchairs inflamed her imagination. "How well the latter would look in the Rectory drawing-room—that is, if they went cheap."

No sooner had the car disappeared from view than I hastened upstairs, and arrayed myself in my serge, ulster, and best hat; all my old belongings, in the shape of dresses, petticoats, hats, and boots, I had heaped into two substantial piles in the middle of my room. Calling up big and little Mary, I made a short but vigorously worded speech, telling them that I wished to take leave of them as I was going away. A scene of intense dismay, lamentation, and expostulation was the result. To their questions and remonstrances I turned a deaf ear; but I impressed upon them, with great persistence, the patent fact, "that I was very unhappy at Gallow—that I could no longer look upon it as my home, for reasons well known to Mr. French and Mr. Beresford—and that after I had gone they were most welcome to hear these reasons from the Rector's own two lips."

"I was going without his knowledge?" "Yes, certainly I was," I calmly replied to their simultaneous outcry; "and that if they attempted to interfere with me, they were no *true* friends of mine. I was going to a very happy home; but wherever I might be, far or near, I would never forget them, or Gallow—I would sent them presents that would keep me in their mind;" and here, seeing that they were somewhat subdued by my authoritative manner, I commenced to load them with souvenirs from the two heaps in

front of me. Dress was their weakness, their passion ; and my generous distributions of many a coveted article completely overpowered them, and the delicious anticipation of their own appearance in chapel next Sunday, and the subsequent sensation among their immediate friends, and the several "boys" of their acquaintance, quite took the sharp edge off their amazement and their grief.

Between each period of my address, I had plied them with presents—boots to one, a jacket to another, till their arms could literally contain no more. Big Mary, with one of my late ill-conditioned hats on her head, a blue bead necklace round her throat, and an old opera-cloak of my mother's about her shoulders, presented a most comic appearance, although the tears were rolling down her broad red cheeks. Little Mary, also, looked quite too funny in my well known scarlet dressing-gown and a large wreath of forget-me-nots—the latter presented to me by Miss Fluker in a moment of spasmodic generosity. Both the Maries knew of old that I had a very robust will of my own, and that in many a struggle with either, I had invariably carried my point, and had my own way, from the time of my tenderest years, when I loudly disputed the great "bed" question, till the other day, when I had taken a meat pie out of the oven (in despite of them both), and carried it off, piping hot, to the old woman at the lodge.

But time was money, more than money to me now ; I had wasted a precious half hour already. I must no longer delay. I persuaded them to carry down my portmanteau, whilst I followed with my bonnet-box, assuring them impressively at every step that I was acting for the best, that I would write to them, and send them money, and that they would be behaving very unkindly if they even wished me to remain at Gallow. I then took a hurried leave of both, and stepping into the twig, was conveyed away from the home of my ancestors, leaving the Maries standing on the steps dissolved in tears, and utterly stunned by the suddenness of my departure.

Dan was, to a certain extent, in my confidence. He was now gardener and man-of-all-work at the Rectory, and had lent me the twig, and promised to drive me to the station. I told him I was leaving Gallow for good, and that if he wished to know the reason, he could ask Mr.

---

French. I was going to my father's people, and neither he nor anyone need be the least uneasy about me. I gave him a pound, as a parting gift, but I was deaf as an adder to his respectful expostulations. His was the last familiar face I looked on for many and many a day. I often recalled him, as he stood on the platform, whip in one hand and hat in the other, as we slowly steamed out of Rossmore station, and I made my first venture out into the great big world, alone, to seek my fortune.

## CHAPTER XIII.

I SET OUT TO SEEK MY FORTUNE, AND MAKE A BAD BEGINNING.

Like ships that sailed for sunny isles,  
But never came to shore.—*Hervey*.

I HAD a first-class carriage entirely to myself, as I travelled up to Dublin by the midday mail. Leaning back luxuriously against the dusty blue cloth cushions, and curling myself up in a corner, I gazed out on the flying landscape—chiefly fields of yellow stubble, and monotonous stretches of flat, green pasture—and tried to realise that I, Nora O'Neill, with ten pounds in my pocket, was casting my old life altogether behind me, and setting out alone on a journey of four thousand miles. I was most emphatically “on my own hook” now, as Rody would have expressed it; I had taken my affairs entirely into my hands, and whether for weal or woe time alone could tell. I felt a strange sinking of the heart, as I thought of my long voyage among total strangers, my arrival in a strange land, also among strangers, and I wiped away one or two tears, and swallowed down a huge lump in my throat, as I looked back on Gallow, where almost every tree and field and face were dear familiar friends; but nevertheless my resolution was unshaken—nothing, nothing, would tempt me to return. As we glided into Kingsbridge station, I promptly responded to a cabby's eager signal, and was soon rattling along the quay in solitary state, my portmanteau on the roof above me and my bonnet-box at my feet. I proceeded to the North Wall direct, and at once went on board the Liverpool boat. The stout, jolly-looking stewardess was not a little surprised at my early arrival; but when I explained to her that I had no friends in Dublin, and was crossing alone, she was very civil and hospitable. Finding, on further

inquiry, that I was not a schoolgirl, but a young lady who considered herself quite grown up, and was proceeding abroad in that capacity, she regarded me with sincere but kindly astonishment, and took me under her immediate protection, saw that I had a substantial tea, and a comfortable berth, and waiving the *délassement* of her usual afternoon gossip in the steward's pantry, brought herself and her knitting into the ladies' cabin, in order to keep me company, till the rest of the passengers arrived.

Although I baffled all her roundabout inquiries as to where I was going, and where I came from, she was not the least offended by my reticence—on the contrary, she applauded my reserve, saying, with an air of good-natured approval:

“You do well to be close, going out in the world alone; and keep yourself *to* yourself is my advice to ye; but how your friends allowed a young lady with your looks to be ‘stravagueing’ about by herself, bates Banagher!” My looks! my friends’ opinion of *them* was of the meanest. How often had Miss Fluker told me that I had not one redeeming feature—that I was peculiarly and disagreeably plain!

Next morning, the motherly stewardess personally confided me to a cabman of her acquaintance, with strict injunctions to take every care of me, and drive me to Waller’s shipping agency in Water Street. As we jolted along the docks, I looked forth and saw big drays thundering past, crowds of gentlemen, workmen, navvies, and sailors hurrying to and fro, and heard the ceaseless, deafening roar of traffic. I asked myself whether I was waking or dreaming, and if I was the very self-same young person who had left Gallow the previous morning? I felt quite amazed at my own self-possession and *sang froid*, as I alighted in Water Street, passed through an open doorway, and made my way up to Waller’s office on the second flight. On the stairs I was met by several young men, hurrying down in various degrees of haste. It was very evident that in this part of the world time was money. In two minutes more I had passed through a swing-door and made known my errand in a low and timid voice to a clerk, who conducted me to an inner sanctum, in which the head of the house, Mr. Waller himself, was seated at a high desk, with a pen behind his ear.

"Pray sit down," he said, graciously waving his hand towards an easy-chair. "Miss Neville, I believe?"

I bowed—scarlet. This was the first time I had heard my new name.

"I have had a telegram about you, from a Colonel Neville, your uncle. It came yesterday. It says: 'Come by *Corunna*, with Colonel Keith.' I can't lay my hand on it just this moment"—searching among his papers with hasty, nimble fingers. "The *Corunna* sails to-morrow evening from Morpeth Docks, Birkenhead, at eight o'clock sharp. Shall you be ready to start?"

"Yes, quite ready, thank you!" I answered meekly.

"Your heavy baggage—is it all right? It will have to be on board this afternoon," authoritatively.

Before I had time to reply, the swing-door was violently pushed open, and a stout, elderly gentleman, with the most good-humoured face I ever saw, hurried in in breathless haste. He was dressed in a suit of dark blue serge, and carried a small leather bag in his hand, and an overcoat on his arm.

"You are the very man I want!" said Mr. Waller, rising and shaking hands with him cordially. "Here," indicating me, "is your young charge, Miss Neville, just come to inquire about her passage."

"Delighted to see you, Miss Neville," said Colonel Keith, seizing me eagerly by both hands, and shaking them as they never were shaken before. "Your uncle and aunt are my oldest friends, and I am only too glad to hear that I am to take charge of you. Did you travel over from Ireland by yourself? and where is your luggage? and where are you stopping?"

I told him, in answer to his treble-barrelled question, "that I had but just arrived, was stopping *nowhere* as yet, and that my luggage was on a cab below—only a portmanteau and a box."

"Only a portmanteau and a box!" he echoed in a high key of astonishment; "well, you *are* a reasonable young lady. Why, when Mrs. Keith went out with me last time, I think we had about five tons of luggage! To be sure, we took out a piano, and all the glass and crockery," he added as an aside to himself.

It was easy to see that he was an energetic, bustling

individual. In five minutes he had received all directions touching the *Coranna*, where she lay, when she sailed, etc. ; and armed with our tickets, we took leave of Waller's office, and hastened downstairs. We drove to a splendid hotel, where we breakfasted about twelve o'clock, and then we sallied forth to see the town of Liverpool.

My attention was distracted between my new friend, who was volubly relating his family history for the past five-and-twenty years, telling me all about his wife and his daughter, and his son in the staff corps, and his own "off-reckonings," occasionally interrupting himself to point out something remarkable. My attention, as I have said before, was divided ; my ears were given to Colonel Keith, my eyes to the many new and marvellous sights. The life and activity everywhere struck me forcibly ; no one dawdled ; everyone appeared to have an object in view as they hurried briskly by.

The crowds and crowds of men, evidently very busy men, amazed me, as did also the immense and ceaseless traffic of trams and omnibuses as we walked up Lord Street, Church Street, and Bold Street. Before certain shop-windows I lingered, awe-struck and dumb ; not only was there more energy and vitality, but there was quite as much variety and fashion, as in dear, old, dirty Dublin. Colonel Keith bought me some books, a steamer chair, a sunshade, and a box of Everton toffee, and having seen St. George's Hall and the reading-room, we retraced our steps to our hotel. I was not sorry to sit down and rest, but my indefatigable companion had no sooner ordered dinner, and provided me with a book, than he posted off to Birkenhead, to make arrangements about our cabins and our (or, rather, *his*) luggage.

The next evening, we were quietly steaming down the Mersey ; it was a fine starlight night, and the lights of the shipping in the Sloyne, and of Waterloo and Seaforth on one side, and Birkenhead and New Brighton on the other, made a very pretty, and, to me, wholly novel scene. Once out past the light-ship, I experienced a curious and most uncomfortable sensation, and precipitately retired to my cabin below.

It would be useless to pretend that I was a good sailor, because I was the very reverse ! Four days' incessant



rolling reduced me to my lowest physical and mental ebb; on the afternoon of the fifth, I staggered on deck, a mere wreck. The weather was warm and sunny and the sea comparatively smooth and calm; the blue sky overhead and the refreshing sea-breeze invigorated my much depressed spirits. I no longer wished to be flung overboard, to die at *once* and have done with it, as I had yearned to do for the last four days. I had escaped from the clutches of the stewardess too, a merry-looking young female, who took a fiendish delight in acquainting me with the *menu* at breakfast and dinner.

"Bacon, miss," she would urge cheerfully, when I loathed the very name of food. "Do try a taste, there's a dear; a nice bit of fried fat bacon to give a relish to the toast."

At dinner-time it was the same story, despite my loudest, and most energetic disclaimers.

"Lovely loin of roast pork, miss; the very smell of it would do you good—just try a morsel—*do* now!"

For four consecutive days I had been a passive victim in this woman's hands; now I had come on deck I was rid of my tormentor. I had at last an opportunity of studying my fellow-passengers. There were not many, not more than twenty, I remarked to myself as I glanced languidly round. Colonel Keith took me under his immediate protection, selected a nice sheltered spot for my chair, enveloped my knees in his warm maul, and laid himself out to entertain me. He brought up and presented to me a young officer, a Mr. Campbell, who had been home on leave and was now returning to his regiment, the "West Shetland" (newly named), strange to say, stationed at Mulkapore. He and Colonel Keith were evidently old acquaintances, and talked an immensity of Indian "gup" across me as I sat between them, an amused and bewildered listener. I could not make out half they meant. For instance, Colonel Keith observed that "one of the Juke's girls was going to be married, and it was really Pucka *this* time." What did *that* mean, I wondered.

"Oh, trust her mother for that! She won't let another fellow slip through her fingers. She is a first-class old shikarry," returned Mr. Campbell decisively.

What was a shikarry? I gathered from the conversa-

tion that Mulkapore was a very gay station, and celebrated alike for sport and "spins." As twilight deepened, it became quite chilly, and I shared the maud with its owner and Mr. Campbell. Other passengers gathered round, and soon we were the centre of a sociable circle, all in the best possible spirits. Some sang songs, some told stories, and all made jokes. It was quite a new kind of life to me. One week ago I had been sitting on the stile at Gallow, taking my last look at the bog and bidding it good-bye. Now I was on the deck of an ocean steamer, surrounded by strangers, and yet quite at my ease, under Colonel Keith's broad wing, putting in my small oar now and then, and adding a few words to the general conversation. I got on very well with Mr. Campbell. In some ways he reminded me of Rody. Like him he was outspoken, and perhaps slightly dictatorial, but he was a more refined, and (dare I even *think* it ?) a more gentlemanly type than my old play-fellow—tall, very slight, with thin aquiline features, and curly brown hair—hair which thatched a considerable amount of brains, as I afterwards discovered. In answer to the tea-bell, we descended to the cabin, and sat together, I dividing the two gentlemen. I was very hungry, and quite ready to do ample justice to the first meal I had enjoyed for nearly five days. The sea-air had made me sleepy, and after a short turn on deck I again went below. The Bay was now as smooth as glass, the night very calm, but foggy. As long as it was not rough, I did not care; and I lost no time in undressing and tumbling into my nice little white berth, and ere my head had been five minutes on the pillow, I was sound, sound asleep.

Out of a deep, dreamless slumber I was awake by a bump that nearly shook me out on the floor! Another followed still worse, which discharged me into the middle of the cabin. I jumped up now, thoroughly awake. Shouts and cries, and a great many people running overhead, warned me that something serious was the matter. I cautiously opened my cabin-door and peeped out, and in so doing came into violent collision with Colonel Keith, who, in shirt and trousers only, and with his hair all brushed the wrong way, burst into the doorway, exclaiming breathlessly, "We are aground! On rocks! Slip on something and come on deck this instant! Don't waste a second, there's a

good girl ! There's no danger," he added reassuringly, as he turned and ran down the cabin with an alacrity I could not have believed possible.

It seemed to me that *everyone* was running. The passengers appeared to be rushing frantically up and down the saloon with coats, and bags, and anything that came to hand. I returned to my cabin instantly, and slipped on a petticoat, a pair of shoes, and a pale blue flannel dressing-gown, and hastily made my way down the saloon and up on deck. As I reached the top of the companion ladder, the ship, which had run straight on to the coast of Spain in the thick, dense fog, suddenly heeled over, and lay on her beam-ends, nearly hurling us into the sea. Colonel Keith seized me, and dragged me to a kind of shelter at the leeside ; and there I cowered, shivering with cold, clutching him convulsively, knowing well that he was my sheet-anchor. The scene was indescribable. Daylight had broken, and through the fog, I could dimly descry immense perpendicular rocks towering hundreds of feet above us—the coast of Spain, and very dangerous, grim, and forbidding it looked. The *Corunna* lay over on one side, completely at the mercy of the sea, which broke over her from bows to stern.

Several attempts were now made to lower the boats. One was stove in, and one was swamped with all hands, another had been carried off the davits and swept out to sea, and all that now remained between us and destruction was the lifeboat. Presently we were accosted by the captain—how changed from the gay and cheery sailor of the previous evening ! His face looked drawn and agonised, as he took my hand and said :

"It's all my fault, Miss Neville, all my fault ; but, never fear, I'll save you. Come with me."

We followed him with the greatest difficulty on to the bridge, where the lifeboat still remained intact. The most tremendous exertions of two or three sailors, and nearly all the passengers, at length succeeded in lowering her, but the instant she was launched a wave drove her against the steamer and stove her side in. Being a lifeboat her air chambers kept her still afloat, and we prepared to descend. Just as we were about to do so, an enormous wave washed over us ; it drenched us from head to foot, and dashed the unfortunate stewardess against a henceop, cutting her head

open in a frightful manner ; it also disabled two of the men. Directly after this we were lowered into the boat, already half full of water, and shoved off from the dangerous neighbourhood of the *Corunna*. There were at least thirty of us tightly packed together in the seemingly sinking boat—half-a-dozen sailors, some second-class passengers, a doctor and his wife, Mr. Campbell, the second officer, ourselves, and some others, all closely huddled together, wet and half frozen.

We took it in turns to bail out, using our hands and the men's caps, but our exertions were of little use. The women and the men passengers were crowded up at the stern, which was a little higher out of the water than the bows.

One of the sailors, a young man with a bright, cheerful face, kept up our sinking spirits by telling us that he had been in many a worse scrape before, and that we were right in the line of ships, and certain to be picked up before long, and would breakfast on board some steamer without doubt.

"There's the blessed sun!" he cried, as the sun at last made its appearance through the fog; "*now* we are all right!"

I sat for more than an hour with the stewardess's head in my lap. She seemed to be quite stunned—only moaning a little from time to time. I had bound up her head in Mr. Campbell's silk handkerchief—it was all I could do for her. Fortunately for us the bay was comparatively smooth; great, long, rolling waves were all we had to contend with, and over these we slowly drifted, perfectly helpless, and in mortally deepening in the water. In spite of incessant, almost frantic bailing—well, everyone knew that they were telling for their lives—we still sank steadily.

The fog lifted a little, and presently we saw a fine large steamer coming in our direction. Oh, the joy of that moment! Mr. Harris, the second officer, took off his coat and waved it on a boat-hook. We shouted, and screamed, and finally cheered—such a miserable, forlorn cheer—led by Colonel Keith's stentorian voice.

"Cheer, boys, if you *ever* cheered!" he cried; "*now*, all together. I'll give the time. Hip, hip, *hurrah!*"

Fancy people cheering—giving voice to three times

three in the very jaws of death. Our cheers had some effect—the steamer stopped. We thought we were saved. Poor deluded wretches!—we laughed and talked hysterically; we shook each other's hands. Some of us actually shed tears; such was the revulsion of feeling. But what was our frenzy, our agony, to see the steamer put up a jib and calmly resume her course; she had mistaken us for a Spanish fishing-boat.

A blank, an *awful* silence, succeeded her departure. Even Miller, the young sailor whose cheerfulness had hitherto buoyed us up, even *he* was dumb, and his face assumed a ghastly, ashen hue. At last he, like all of us, found himself confronted with death. One of the second-class passengers—a big, rough man, in butcher-boots—now rose, and with frightful oaths and imprecations pushed his way amongst us. Thrusting us violently aside, and taking his seat at the very end of the boat, he was followed by two boys, nearly mad with fear; indeed, one of them, who was quite insane, clung to Colonel Keith, gibbering and shuddering—his eyes were turned in his head, and he presented a most awful, horrible spectacle. The other and elder lay rolling in the bottom of the boat, tearing his jacket with his teeth and apparently stark mad. I was just as much afraid of these frantic fellow-sufferers as of the great, green, hungry sea that was waiting to swallow me. The boat now made several rolls, as if preparatory to sinking. At each successive roll we expected to go over; at length she gave one tremendous lurch, and we were all instantly struggling in the water. It was well for me *now* that I had learnt to swim. Colonel Keith and I struck out for the open, and had a narrow escape of being dragged down by the drowning.

How awful it was! There were our fellow-creatures drowning all around us. Colonel Keith had a life-belt and I had an oar, and so we managed to keep ourselves afloat. We saw the boat righted, and the survivors—alas! how few, scramble in; but as we knew that she would probably capsize again we made no attempt to return to her, but remained in the water, now floating on a wave, now in the trough of the sea. This continued for two mortal hours—hours that seemed days. With agonised earnestness I endeavoured to pray; no connected prayer could I remember.

I dreaded with unspeakable horror the hand of death—the last agony. Oh, that it was over! oh, that I was already dead! Where would I be then? where would I be within the next half hour? “God help me!” was all I could ejaculate, as my mind took in the frightful reality of my position—that the time I had to live might now be counted by *minutes*, and that the sands of my life were ebbing fast.

Colonel Keith's mind ran very much on his pension, and he seemed to find some relief in uttering his thoughts aloud.

“At any rate she'll have four hundred pounds a year and the insurance money. They ought to make it double for *this*,” I heard him mutter. “Only fifty-one my last birthday; it's a bad business—a bad business.” Then very loud to me, “Keep up, Miss Neville; what's your name?”

“Nora!” I gasped with chattering teeth.

“Keep up, Nora! Never give in. ‘Whilst there's life there's hope.’”

With such-like little speeches he would encourage me from time to time; but at last I ceased to make any response. My limbs were so cold and so cramped, I had lost almost all power over them. I could not “keep up” much longer. It was no good!

“Colonel Keith,” I said, “good-bye! I'm going to throw up my arms and go down. I cannot hold out any longer!” I had said I would sooner *die* than marry Maurice—how soon I had been taken at my word! “Good-bye, Colonel Keith!” I cried, now utterly exhausted and worn out. I had risen on the crest of a wave as I said this, and at that instant I descried the mast of a ship! Again we were buried in a hollow; but when next we rose on a wave, she looked quite *close*. The fog lifted at that moment, and I could distinctly see a small steamer rapidly coming straight in our direction.

“Scream *now*, if ever you screamed!” shouted Colonel Keith frantically.

I needed no second bidding. I did scream! I screamed with all the strength of despair. I screamed so that I was *heard*. In another instant the engines were slackened, and we saw someone on the bridge waving his hat.

Oh, happy moment, shall I ever forget you! I knew that we were *saved*! It seemed a good while before a boat

reached us, and then Colonel Keith, a generous, unselfish gentleman, directed the sailors first to take in a poor drowning man who was close to us, and whose agonised entreaties for "an oar! an oar! oh, send me an oar!" had added considerably to my mental torture. He had on a lifebelt, but it seemed insufficient to keep him above water. He was lifted into the boat, and we followed—dragged in by main force, utterly incapable of moving a finger to help ourselves. I remember nothing more till I found myself in a berth in the *Pelican*, warmly wrapped up in blankets, with Colonel Keith's anxious face bending over me. Poor Colonel Keith! I believe he thought I was *dead*, but I soon relieved his mind—relieved it very much, judging by his sudden change of countenance. What quantities of hot brandy and water he made me drink, and I was so cold and exhausted that fortunately it had no intoxicating effect. I heard that eleven others besides ourselves were saved and now on board the steamer—a coasting collier, bound for Gibraltar. What mutual congratulations we exchanged the next day, when I, attired in my dressing-gown (dried in the engine-room), and my costume eked out with a blanket, joined the rest of the shipwrecked passengers! The women kissed and hugged me, the men nearly wrung my arms off, and I need hardly say that I was equally delighted to see all of them, and returned their greetings with corresponding warmth.

We had no stewardess, and no woman on board; but the captain and first mate made us kindly welcome to their wardrobes, and I had no hesitation in availing myself of a warm blue coat, lined with scarlet flannel. Colonel Keith, in the captain's clothes, was really quite *too* funny. Trousers halfway up to his knees, a most painfully tight pea-jacket, much too short in the sleeves, and showing a goodly space of bare wrist. He also displayed a considerable portion of bare legs, which concluded in socks and gorgeous carpet slippers; a cap with the *Pelican* band was added to his outfit, and in this costume he went ashore at Gibraltar, and set about getting some garments that would enable *me* to appear in public. Unknown kind sympathisers sent me a petticoat, a brown barege of the year one, an old circular cloak, and an ancient bonnet of the once famous "spoon" shape. Thus adorned, and wearing the captain's socks and

boots, I made my *début* at Gibraltar! I had no collar, and no hair-pins. What a miserable creature I looked, as I caught a fleeting view of myself in a glass door! I was the image of "Mad Mary Ann," a poor lunatic who used to frequent Kilcool. We were treated as heroes and heroines, and met with very great kindness on "The Rock." I was given an ample supply of underlinen, a neat serge dress, and a couple of white muslins for the Red Sea. Colonel Keith replenished his wardrobe, and added considerably to mine; such necessary articles as brushes and combs, shoes and stockings, a hat and umbrella, were among his most welcome contributions. I wrote a very long letter to Deb, telling her of my adventure and merciful escape; and I promised her a full budget on my arrival in India. I also told her of my bold flight from Kilcool, as I had only sent her a few lines from Liverpool; and I again entreated her to keep my whereabouts a profound secret from all the world save Mrs. West. Colonel Keith telegraphed to my aunt, and I added a few lines on the chance of their arriving a day or two before me. After spending nearly a week at Gibraltar in company with Colonel Keith and Mr. Campbell, and visiting the galleries, the fruit-market, and various other "sights," we once more resumed our journey to the gorgeous East, on board the P. and O. steamer *Hindustan*.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### ON BOARD THE "HINDOSTAN."

To make amends for our calamity, we had splendid weather for the remainder of the voyage; neither storms nor fogs. The *Hindostan* was crowded. We had nearly two hundred fellow-passengers; most of whom were sociably inclined. Music, dancing, and theatricals enlivened our evenings; and altogether a gayer community was seldom afloat. I think people were not a little disappointed at my civilised appearance. I imagine that they expected me to have presented myself in the blanket and dressing-gown, instead of a neat-fitting serge costume.

"You don't look a *bit* as if you had been nearly drowned!" remarked a very pretty, piquant-looking girl, surveying me discontentedly. "You got over it wonderfully, I must say! If I had been hours in the water, hanging on to an oar, I'm certain my hair would have turned perfectly grey with fright, like What's-her-name's, all in one night."

This young lady, Miss Gibbon, and I sat together at meals, and became rather intimate, and, as far as she was concerned, confidential. She was going out to be married to a coffee-planter; and was, without exception, the most candid, matter-of-fact young person I ever came across. She coolly informed me that she did not care two straws about Mr. Hogg! Was it not an odious name? but there were so many of them at home—three girls younger than herself—that it was a good thing for her mother (who was a widow, and by no means well off) to get one of them off her hands!

"Our good looks are all we have; our faces are our fortunes; and I am nearly twenty-six, and it is quite time for me to be settled, is it not?" she asked with disconcerting frankness.

I gazed at her in mute amazement. She was quite a new experience to countrified Nora O'Neill!

"You do amuse me," she exclaimed, "you open your great big eyes so wide, and look as if I had seven heads! By-the-way, what colour do you call your eyes—hazel, or light brown?" she asked in a parenthesis. "I thought *all* Irish girls had blue or grey eyes."

My eyes had been called "yellow," "mud-colour," and "cat's eyes," by Rody and Deb when in a specially critical humour. Consequently I felt some diffidence in advancing my *own* opinion, viz., that they were hazel, with black trimmings.

"If *you* were one of a large, pauper, genteel family," pursued Miss Gibbon loquaciously, "you would soon know what I mean. Mr. Hogg came home last year, and happened to stay with friends of ours. He is fabulously rich; an enormous *parti*, both in purse and person. That's a pun," pausing for applause. "And all the girls in the place instantly set their caps at him, and he was good enough to throw the handkerchief to *me*, and I picked it up, and said 'Thank you kindly.' *Me voilà en route* to marry him, wedding-dress, trousseau, cake, and all complete!"

"And do you love him?" I asked point blank.

"Love him!" she rejoined; "no, I do *not* love him, you dear, little, sentimental goose! I don't *dislike* him, although he is middle-aged, unusually plain, and preposterously fat! I am making what is called a 'good match,' and I can open up a splendid sphere of pastures new to my three pretty, penniless sisters. I shall have them out, according to age, and marry them off! *Now* are you wiser?" she asked, suddenly changing her tone, and looking at me with her head on one side, and an expression of amused interrogation.

Miss Gibbon would half apologise for her extraordinary frankness by telling me that, as we were going to different parts of India, it did not signify two straws what she said to me.

"I must open my mind to *someone*," she would say. "It used to be my sister Bessie; now that she is not within earshot, I repose my confidences in you, an utter stranger; and so much the better; you will soon forget the queer, mad girl you met on board the *Hindostan*, and meanwhile, you serve me as an admirable safety-valve!"

After a time, she ceased to be so expansive; her confidences were no longer mine. The new safety-valve was a very good-looking young man—a Bengal civilian, returning from furlough. Together they paced the deck, together they danced, and played chess, and occupied secluded corners. Only in our cabin and at meal-times did I see anything of Miss Florence Gibbon.

She was certainly a young woman of action; for after a short time she complained of the draught at our table (*this in the Red Sea!*) and moved away to the one at which her Bengal civilian took his meals.

The other lady who shared my cabin was a Mrs. Fortescue-Roper, a tall, slight individual, with a profusion of fair, almost orange-coloured, hair; her eyes were pale and her features insignificant, but somehow her whole *tout ensemble* was most stylish and striking. I was not surprised to hear that Anglo-Indian ladies were considered lazy after I became acquainted with her. From the first, she treated me with an affectionate familiarity that there was no resisting. She was an experienced woman of the world, and I was a raw, unsophisticated, country girl, and as wax in her hands. She took a prodigious fancy to me the instant she saw me! She told me that "I amused her immensely, I was so refreshingly green," her own expression; "I was moreover a heroine, who had saved a whole boat's crew from the waves of the Bay of Biscay!"

This I indignantly denied; but my anxious disclaimers were of no avail.

"There is not a bit of good in your talking, my dear; no one will believe you. It is in all the newspapers that you saved Colonel Keith's life, and if I were in *your* place I would swear that I had saved the other twelve passengers into the bargain! Always stand up for yourself, and put your best foot foremost."

Mrs. Roper occupied a top berth, and made that elevation an excuse for sending me all her errands, and they were not a few.

"Go into the saloon, and bring me the yellow-backed novel from the top of the piano, there's a darling! Don't look into it, for it is a very naughty book, and not fit for an innocent little pet lamb like you;" or, "Would you mind bringing me the eau-de-cologne, dearest?" or, "Just run

up on deck—you are young and nimble—and tell Colonel Durand that I am not coming out till the afternoon, I have *such a headache!*"

She never got up till Miss Gibbon and I were both dressed. She liked to have the cabin to herself. "Air, and space, and plenty of elbow-room," were necessities she could not dispense with.

I was an early riser, and only too glad to escape from the stuffy cabin and take a turn on deck with Colonel Keith, who had fallen in with many Anglo-Indians, and was a most sought-after and popular man. Breakfast would be almost forgotten when Mrs. Roper would make her appearance on deck, charmingly dressed in an elaborate washing costume, and altogether got up with considerable care.

To see her languidly moving towards her long cane chair, feebly responding to the anxious inquiries of a host of attentive gentlemen, one would think she was a confirmed but most interesting invalid. I knew better, having seen a well-laden tray despatched to her berth during breakfast.

Extended at full length in her steamer-chair, her head gracefully buried in cushions, and her beautifully-shod feet modestly displayed beneath the frills and furbelows of her morning-gown, she would remain *perdue* the entire forenoon, an enormous white-covered umbrella concealing her and the favoured cavalier, who read and talked to her, in a low voice, until their *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the luncheon-bell.

No one on board the *Hindostan* believed the heresy "that luncheon is an insult to your breakfast, and an injury to your dinner!" No, no! They all eagerly responded to the loudly clanging bell by hurrying headlong down to the saloon, where a substantial cold refecton awaited all comers.

Mrs. Roper formed an exception to the rule. She still remained prone in her chair, slowly fanning herself with a prodigious black fan, and making observations in a faint, subdued tone. A *recherché* little luncheon, accompanied by a bottle of champagne, was nevertheless disposed of under the shelter of the umbrella; and during the afternoon, Mrs. Roper would be sufficiently revived to stroll along the deck,

arm-in-arm with her aide-de-camp, and exchange a few words, *en passant*, with the other passengers. But after dinner was the time to see her at her best. Arrayed in an exquisite demi-toilet, and surrounded by a select circle, she was the gayest of the gay, the liveliest of the lively—a *leetle* fast perhaps, and rather too fond of the adjectives “beastly,” “revolting,” and “disgusting,” as applied to people and things. Nevertheless, it certainly seemed that the men found great entertainment in her society, and she appeared to afford them as much amusement in one way as I did to her in another.

We had dancing on deck most evenings. Going down the Red Sea the weather was glorious—not a ripple on the water, and splendid moonlight nights. Mrs. Roper had no taste for the sublime; she prided herself on being commonplace and matter-of-fact. I myself heard her describe the moonlight track on the water as looking so very *oily* that it forcibly reminded her of *melted butter*. She “loathed the moon,” she said; all the same she found it very useful, as, to its beams alone, she tripped the deck on light fantastic toe. The piano was the band, and dancing went on every evening for at least a week. I could not dance a step (except an Irish jig), and I was obliged to decline many pressing invitations to take the floor, as I watched the revolving couples, dying (but not daring) to follow their example.

I have not touched upon the miscellaneous horde of other passengers, far too numerous to particularise. There was a strong civil element, half-a-dozen forlorn grass-widows *en route* to rejoin their husbands; a judge, a general; a lord, bent on tiger-shooting; an M.P., boiling to write a pamphlet on the late famine, and several large clutches of young ladies, bound for the East, under the wings of various discreet and experienced chaperons. As a stray and friendless “chicken” I was permitted to join one of the broods, and spent most of my time working and reading under the ægis of a Mrs. Turner-Jones, a very kind, motherly lady—a faint, fashionable, travelled copy of Mrs. West.

My two cabin companions had had “a few words” previous to my arrival on board, and were not on speaking terms; a state of affairs that was exceedingly unpleasant for me, as they used me as a channel of communication

whether I would or no. For instance, Mrs. Roper would say :

"Miss Neville, will you be so good as to tell Miss Gibbon that I cannot accommodate her dresses upon my hooks?"

"Miss Neville, say to Mrs. Roper, that those hooks are mine, not hers."

Or, "Miss Neville, tell Miss Gibbon that I *insist* on the port being closed."

"Tell Mrs. Roper I intend to keep it open!"

Then Mrs. Roper would spring out of her top berth, with surprising agility, and slam the port with a defiant bang. Ere she had scrambled back to her couch, Miss Gibbon would have boldly thrown it open; and as fast as Mrs. Roper shut it, she did the same thing. At length, she wearied out her antagonist, who hysterically desired me to "tell Miss Gibbon she was a most unbearable, insolent, young person, and that she (Mrs. Roper) would certainly complain to the captain of her abominable conduct."

Of course we all landed at Port Said. In getting out of the boat Miss Gibbon hurt her hand very badly. As I used to poultice it and bandage it for her, and assist her to dress, and do her hair, we were brought very much together, and she again resorted to me as a "safety-valve," and honoured me with her confidence—one evening especially. We were sitting together on deck, in the dusk, and had not opened our lips to each other for more than a quarter of an hour, when Miss Gibbon suddenly exclaimed :

"I declare at times I've a good mind to jump overboard!"

I peered into her face in the dim light, but I could not make out whether she was in jest or earnest, or what to gather from her alarming declaration.

"You know I am going out to be married," she went on. "In me you see—or rather you do not see, for it's far too dark—the future bride of the rich Mr. Hogg. I suppose he is actually counting the very hours till I arrive in Madras!"

"Probably," I answered; "and you, are you reckoning up the days? Shall you be pleased to see him?"

"Pleased to see him! I hate the thought of him; I *detest* him!" she answered vehemently.

"Then why—why——?" I stammered.

"Why marry him? you would say. Because we are so poor, as I have told you fifty times; I have no choice. He has actually paid for my passage and outfit—think of that!" spreading out both hands, a favourite gesture. "When I accepted him, I did not absolutely *dislike* him. I cared for no one else, and no one else cared for me. *Now* it is different; the very idea of Mr. Hogg drives me nearly frantic."

"And what will you do?" I inquired, with my usual bluntness.

"That is exactly the question I am asking myself night and day. I cannot return to England, for I have no money; I cannot abscond, when I reach Madras, for the same excellent reason. I am only certain of *one* thing, and that is, come what may, I will not marry Mr. Hogg," replied his fiancée, in a tone of stern determination.

"I would not, if I were you, if I did not like him," remarked sage seventeen serenely.

"I heard Mrs. Jones telling a story of some girl, who had been engaged on a short acquaintance to a gentleman for years and years, and went out to India to marry him; but when she saw him, she found that she really *could* not, and she sold all her wedding presents and outfit in Bombay, to pay her passage home in the next steamer."

"I am *sure* she did right," I concluded with great emphasis, and in a tone of the deepest approval.

"History does not mention the kind of reception she met with at home when she arrived back to her loving relatives, sans husband, sans trousseau, sans presents!" remarked Miss Gibbon sarcastically. "She received a tepid welcome, believe *me*."

"No, no; I might work my passage home as stewardess—I should not mind *that*, but to face my mother and sisters, and uncles and aunts, and cousins, who have all been chanting triumphant pæans in praise of my excellent sense and magnificent prospects—*no*, I could not do *that*! Come along; there's the bell for tea," she exclaimed, jumping up, and thus bringing the conversation to an abrupt conclusion.

Miss Gibbon could not endure Mrs. Roper, as I have already hinted.

"Horrid old frump!" she would say. "She ought to be ashamed of herself. The way she goes on is preposterous—at her age, too!"

"Age!" I echoed. "Why, she is quite young."

"Forty, if an hour; probably forty-five," returned Miss Gibbon with unusual animation.

"Oh, how can you say so?" I expostulated indignantly. "She does not look much older than you do."

"Don't you *now* that she is 'made up,' you dear little innocent Paddy? Are you not aware that *that* is the reason she performs her toilet solus? She does not want to let us into its mysteries, in case we might divulge the secrets of the prison-house. Have you not remarked how she keeps the curtain of her berth drawn, and her face quite in the shade, and if you go near her she always puts up her fan. What an unsophisticated little creature it is!" she added, surveying me with compassionate curiosity.

I had *not* observed this before, but it struck me now as a remarkable fact.

"I firmly believe," continued my companion forcibly, "that every night she takes off her hair and eyebrows, and removes her complexion and all her back teeth! *What* is in that mysterious little black bag that she always takes to bed with her? Tell me that!" authoritatively.

I shook my head hopelessly, in confession of miserable ignorance.

"Mr. Price told me," pursued Miss Gibbon with still greater animus, "that he remembers her fifteen years ago, when he first came out, looking much the same as she does now—as notorious a flirt, and as vain and empty-headed as ever she could be. I wish I could lay hands on her bottles of hair-dye, and other various little artificial aids, and pitch them out of the cabin window. Then we should see her in her true colours," concluded Miss Gibbon viciously, "with dark hair and a tallow skin."

"Miss Gibbon is a beast!"—this was Mrs. Roper's opinion—"a great goggle-eyed creature, like a barmaid. The way in which she is carrying on with Harvey Price is simply scandalous; considering, too, that she is engaged to be married. Whoever the *fiancé* may be, I pity him from my heart"—some people said that Mrs. Roper did not



possess that organ. "If she thinks that she is going to catch Harvey Price, she is greatly mistaken. I'll put him on his guard this very day. Someone told me that her father was an auctioneer. If he was a scavenger, it would never surprise *me*. She is the regular stamp of an adventurer."

So much Mrs. Roper confided to Mrs. Jones on a certain sunny afternoon in my hearing. She still patronised me, and made me useful, and gave me plenty of advice gratis; and one day, when I was holding some wool for her, she became quite maternal in her solicitude, as she wound off skein after skein with jewelled taper fingers.

"Of course, *you* will marry," she said, nodding her head confidently. "But take my advice, and have nothing to say to the military; they are pleasant, but poor. A Bengal or Bombay civilian, well up—if not already a member of council—is *your* man. And, once married, you can flirt away with the redcoats as much as ever you please."

"Mrs. Roper!" I cried aghast, "how can you say such things, even in joke? But it is of no consequence, for I never intend to marry. No, never!"

"Then what are you coming out for, my good girl?" she asked with raised brows and a highly incredulous expression of countenance.

"To live with my aunt and uncle."

"Oh! Well, your aunt and uncle won't have the pleasure of your society for long! You can tell them so, with my compliments. Of course you know that you are a very pretty girl?"

"I know nothing of the sort," I answered, colouring, "and I don't think you ought to turn me into ridicule; you are making fun of me."

"Come, now, there is no use in putting on such an affectation of modesty," gazing at me with an air of lazy amusement. "It won't go down with *me*."

"But I really mean what I say, Mrs. Roper, I really do. I have been told that I was ugly as long as I can remember anything; as a little girl I was simply hideous."

"Very possibly," returned my companion coolly; "but now that you are a *big* girl, you are the very reverse! You are uncommonly pretty!"

"I was always told that I was plain!" I murmured, still

clinging to old traditions. "I'm *sure* you must be making fun of me."

"Who told you that you were plain?" she asked, sitting erect, and looking greatly entertained.

"*Everybody*," I answered forcibly; "grandfather, Deb, and dozens of others."

"How long was this ago?"

"Oh, four or five years ago!"

"And did *no* one ever say anything else?" she asked dubiously.

"Yes; the servants and beggars used to call me a 'lovely girl;' but that is a mere figure of speech in Ireland; and Rody told me last summer that I was not so bad as he *expected*, and might pass in a crowd, if I got a good shove."

"Your friend Rody evidently understands the art of paying graceful compliments! I can scarcely believe that you entertain so low an opinion of your charms." Leaning forward, and looking into my face with calm critical scrutiny, she said: "Your eyes alone are a fortune to you, putting your dear little mouth and nose out of the question. You are a case of the ugly duckling, my dear. I have no doubt that once you were a detestable little duckling, but *now* you are a magnificent young swan. Probably your worthy aunt and uncle would say that I was poisoning your mind if they heard me; but I think that a girl who is pretty and does not *know* it (or pretends she does not) is the eighth wonder of the world. Hold up your head—you will be the belle of Mulkapore."

## CHAPTER XV

### A FAITHLESS FIANCÉE.

What mighty ills have not been done by women?—*Otway*.

I STILL sat silent, mechanically winding up the last ball of wool, and vainly endeavouring to adjust my ideas. "A pretty girl"—the intelligence was certainly most agreeable; but could it be *true*, or was it mere pleasant banter? It seemed incredible!

"Let me give you a little bit of advice, my dear," she continued; "do not be so brusque and abrupt with gentlemen. You keep them all at arm's length—they are afraid of you, really *quite* afraid of you. Mr. Spooner, who admires you immensely, came up to me this afternoon, and said: 'Is my nose on my face? Miss O'Neill nearly snapped it off just now.'"

"I *hate* Mr. Spooner!" I observed with energy.

"My dear, my dear!" reprovingly. "He is the judicial commissioner at Arconum, and draws five thousand rupees a month."

"I don't know what a commissioner is, and I don't care if he has a million a month," I answered recklessly.

"All in good time," replied Mrs. Roper complacently, nodding her head up and down, like a mandarin. "You will be more worldly-wise this time next year. This time next year, you will value position and rupees just as much as any other girl in India."

The evening before we touched at Galle I retired, as I always did, at ten o'clock. Mrs. Roper would remain pacing the deck, till nearly midnight with one of her train; and latterly Miss Gibbon had been quite as late in descending to her berth. As I opened the door of our cabin, I remarked that all Miss Gibbon's portmanteaus were packed and strapped, and drawn out into the middle of the floor.

Before I had time to ask a question, their owner, who was mending her gloves by the light of a candle, raised her eyes, and said in a most casual manner :

"I am going to land at Galle to-morrow morning."

"Galle!" I exclaimed in a key of high astonishment.

"And to marry Mr. Harvey Price within the week."

I gasped.

"He has a cousin living at Colombo, and I am to be married from his house. Harvey telegraphed to him from Aden. Harvey is seeing about a steward to take away this luggage, as we land at daybreak. I'm only taking my 'present-use' baggage, of course. All my trousseau and wedding presents, and the cake, may go on to Madras—I have no claim to them *now*," she concluded with the utmost composure.

I seated myself on a camp-stool and gazed at her in open-mouthed amazement.

"Yes, you may well stare. You see before you a very happy girl, I can tell you, although to-morrow I shall be given up to retribution by the whole ship—not even the stewards or the stokers will spare me. *Après moi le déluge*" (laughing).

"And Mr. Hogg—what about *him*?" I asked when I had recovered the power of speech.

"Oh, of course, I'm treating him abominably" (shrugging her shoulders). "But after all it is better for him in reality if he only knew. He is better without a wife who would have been a most miserable woman, and who, without doubt, would have made him a miserable man! I am treating him in reality with the *truest* kindness," she added in a tone of pious conviction.

"You can scarcely expect him to take *that* view of the subject all at once. Poor man! I think he is greatly to be pitied; and he will be the laughing-stock of all his friends."

"Pooh! what harm if he is? He will soon get over that, and easily find another wife. One of my own sisters would gladly console him, I dare say—Emily, for instance," she observed reflectively. "All my things would fit *her*, and there need be no bother or expense about another outfit or trousseau—not at all a bad idea!" with increased animation.

"I should not think that he would select a wife from your family a *second* time," I observed with withering sarcasm.

"He might do worse ! Emily is a very pretty girl with beautiful blue eyes and fair hair. Talking of fair hair, be sure you make my affectionate adieux to Mrs. Roper. How furious she will be ! Commend me to her, and our next merry meeting !"

"Who is to break it to everybody ?" I asked abruptly, pausing, comb in hand—we were now preparing for bed.

"Why *you*, of course," she answered promptly. "Here are two letters—instead of leaving them on the pincushion, in the orthodox way, the pincushion being wanting, I make them over to you."

"I'll have nothing to do with them," I exclaimed, energetically waving the proffered missives away with my hairbrush.

"I only ask you to give these letters to the captain to-morrow morning. I leave the delicate mission of breaking the matter to Mr. Hogg in *his* hands. He is a man of strong nerve, and won't mind."

"I'll have nothing to say to them !" I reiterated relentlessly.

"Very well, then, I shall give them to the steward. It will be all the same. But I thought you might have liked the *clat* of announcing the news," returned Miss Gibbon with the most perfect *sang froid*. "You will see Mr. Hogg ; he is sure to come on board. You will recognise him at once by his extraordinary resemblance to a hippopotamus walking on its hind legs."

This flattering description was cut short by the entrance of the stewardess (evidently in the secret), who came in and dragged out the baggage, and delivered it over to someone who was waiting outside in the saloon. When she had left, Miss Gibbon came over to my berth, and took leave of me, and kissed me.

"Wish me joy," she whispered, "wish me joy, Nora. You must come up and stay with us in Calcutta next cold weather, and I'll marry you to *another* Bengal civilian."

"It's all very wrong, I know," I replied nervously ; "but all the same I do wish you joy."

"It is not a quarter as bad as it *looks*. To marry a

man I could not endure would have been very much worse—would it not ?”

“It would,” I assented half doubtfully.

“To have sworn to like him, whilst I knew I *hated* him, would have been perjury—would it not ?”

At this critical moment the entrance of Mrs. Roper put an end to her excuses and explanations, and, kissing me warmly, she retired to her own berth.

When I awoke the next morning, she was gone ! There was a great deal of excitement and talking, and shaking of heads in consequence ; but as we neared Madras, everyone was too much taken up with their own affairs and plans to give more than a passing thought to the missing bride.

As we lay in the roads, one of the first massulah boats to board us, embarked a burly figure in a gigantic mushroom topee. It was Mr. Hogg ! I saw him conducted into the captain’s cabin, and I saw him no more. My attention was entirely engrossed by the novel scene ; the long, low shore, the dangerous-looking surf, the flocks of catamarans and massulah boats. It was soon my turn to spend a bad quarter of an hour in one of the latter. Had I escaped from the Bay of Biscay to be drowned in Madras surf ? This was a question ever present to me, till we grated on the beach beside the pier, and I sprang out with very small assistance, delighted to be on *terra firma* once more.

Colonel Keith and I drove to an hotel in the Mount Road, ordered rooms and dinner, and then took a gharry to the beach, and listened to the strains of the Governor’s band discoursing the newest dance-music to Madras society—Madras society, drawn up in landaus or Stanhope phaetons, or strolling up and down Cupid’s Bow, enjoying the music and the sea-breeze. Pretty, well-dressed women, soldierly-looking men, elderly, erect, fiercely-moustached veterans, sauntered past our dusty gharry in couples or in lines of four ; and I must admit that I was very considerably impressed by my first glimpse of the Anglo-Indian *at home*.

The following day we took our departure for Mulkapore. As we travelled along over the broad, flat plains, I discovered a sameness in the view that wearied my eyes and disappointed my expectations. A mud village, clustered round a tumble-down fort ; then miles of brown barren plain, with here and there a herd of queer-looking sheep or

goats ; then another mud village and an expanse of paddy, with an occasional pool, in which hideous slate-coloured buffaloes were lying cooling themselves, with their heads above water.

My ideas of India were probably unique. I imagined that all European mankind wore large white straw hats and nankeen suits, according to old family sketches. I expected to see gorgeously caparisoned elephants the only means of transit ; and I was prepared to behold tigers sporting about the plains. But I had already travelled many miles, and not seen one, not even a *cub*, nor any wild animal of any kind whatever ; although I gazed anxiously into every scrap of jungle that we passed through. From the safe elevation of a railway carriage I did not care how many tigers and cheetahs were in view.

I had a deluded notion that curry, frightfully hot curry, provocative of tears, was the staple and only food of the country, besides the pine-apples, guavas, oranges, and mangoes that I was convinced grew in wild luxuriance, and everywhere, and at all times and seasons. The only things that really came up to and surpassed my expectations so far were the mosquitoes. Their activity, voracity, and pertinacity knew no bounds. The nights spent in Madras had been made miserable, thanks to them. These horrible insects had mysteriously introduced themselves through some little flaw in the mosquito-nets, and had banqueted heartily on my face and hands, and rendered me a deplorable spectacle. Happily mosquitoes do not travel by rail, so I was rid of my tormentors for three whole days during our journey to Mulkapore. It was by no means an eventful performance. Three times a day we regularly descended for half-an-hour to wash, and take our meals, at various utterly unpronounceable stations. We slept in the train, travelling steadily all night, and awaking, covered with dust, about six o'clock in the morning. I much admired the Indian morning, so cool, and fresh, and crisp ; who would think it could develop into such an intolerably hot, glaring day ? It amused me to watch the flocks and herds ; most peculiar nondescript-looking animals (and very difficult to make out which were the sheep and which were goats), being conducted to their daily pastures, such as they were—acres of red, burnt-up plain ; to see village women flocking

to most primitive-looking wells, with chatties gracefully posed on their heads; to see the most extraordinary attempts at ploughing I ever witnessed. Everything was new to me, of course; and I spent many hours gazing out of the carriage-window, early and late, whilst that *blasé* old Anglo-Indian, Colonel Keith, slept and snored.

At the junction for Mulkapore, we had a delay of nearly two hours, and here I had an opportunity of catching a glimpse of Indian domestic life! There was no getting into the first-class waiting-room; it was occupied by a *zenana*. The door stood ajar, and as one or two very dirty-looking native women were constantly stepping in and out, I caught a view of several muffled white figures, with holes for their eyes and mouth only in their veils, and these covered with thin white net. Two or three gaudily-dressed children were likewise squatting on the floor. Presently there arose an argument, at first merely in a loud tone, then executed in a higher and higher key; finally, yells and screams. The proprietor of this "happy family," a fat, pompous-looking, very bandy-legged native, with a gold skull-cap, who was airing himself majestically up and down the platform, was called for by the station-master to quell the uproar; but he was utterly useless in the emergency. Both sides of the question were simultaneously launched at his head, and he was evidently denounced by all parties with unanimous shrieks. He withdrew from the waiting-room with much greater alacrity than he had evinced in entering that apartment, evidently powerless to quell the storm.

"It must be bad enough to be henpecked by one wife," remarked Colonel Keith, "but fancy being the scapegoat of half-a-dozen! After all, I think we manage these things better in Europe; what do you say, Nora?"

Before I had time to reply, we heard the welcome tinkle of the bell, and the cry "Passengers for Mulkapore," and we lost not a moment in collecting our small belongings, and ensconcing ourselves in one of the saloon carriages of the Mulkapore State Railway. As we crept gently out of the station, the argument in the ladies' waiting-room could be heard high above every sound, evidently being pursued with unabated fury.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE GORGEOUS EAST.

La langue des femmes est leur épée, et elles ne la laissent pas rouiller.

Under the tropic is our language spoken.—*Edmund Waller*.

HOUR after hour we travelled through a flat, almost treeless, country, and about seven o'clock in the evening steamed into Mulkapore terminus, which represented the end of our long journey. We had not many fellow-passengers, and were speedily claimed by a stern-looking, grizzled, elderly gentleman and a handsome middle-aged lady (in other words my aunt and uncle), who gave me a most affectionate welcome.

In a few minutes we had made our way out of the crowd of natives (who were waiting for the usual supply of fish and ice) to where a large imposing-looking landau and pair of bays awaited us, and were soon bowling briskly along in the direction of the cantonment. I was not sorry to lean back in my corner of the carriage, and rest my aching head, whilst my aunt and Colonel Keith kept up a rapid exchange of question and answer.

We drove through streets of narrow bazaars, and then along wide roads, lined on either side with fine wide-spreading trees, then across an open plain intersected with many white tracks, where my aunt pointed out the church, chapel, cemetery, and club, all of which bore a very great similarity to their European namesakes.

My first impressions of Mulkapore that bright moonlight night, tired and sleepy as I was, were of amazement and admiration. The long shady roads, wide, open, green maidans, contrasted very pleasantly with the arid, rocky country through which we had been travelling. At last we turned in between two white gate-piers, to one of which

was affixed a board and the name, "Colonel Neville, Cantonment Magistrate;" and, trotting up a short avenue, drew rein under a large, open porch. Three yapping dogs instantly rushed out to receive us ere we descended, and submitted me to a rigid investigation, as I followed my aunt into the house. A deep veranda ran all round it, and into this veranda most of the rooms opened. We walked straight into the drawing-room, a very lofty room supported by pillars, then into the dining-room, where was an oval table, exquisitely arranged with snowy linen, plate, and a profusion of lovely flowers. Two turbaned men—evidently the presiding genii—were putting some last deft touches to the decorations as we walked through. The next room was mine—large, airy, and empty-looking; a small bed, veiled in mosquito-net, occupied the centre of the apartment.

"Here is your dressing-room, and here is your ayah, Nora," said my aunt, introducing, with a wave of her hand, a small, dark woman in a snowy muslin garment, with a beaming countenance, enhanced by a nose-ring, who now came forward and made a profound salaam.

"Drugo, this is your young lady."

Drugo's young lady was so overwhelmed with sleep and exhaustion that, within half-an-hour, she was sound asleep under the mosquito-curtains in the little white bed—into which my aunt tucked me with her own hands; and as I laid my drowsy head on the pillow, the one single idea that it contained was this: that, if appearances were to be believed, I had found a very happy home at last. Refreshed by ten hours' dreamless sleep, I was alert, and dressed, and out, by seven o'clock the next morning. My aunt had gone out for her drive, my uncle for his ride, leaving strict injunctions that I was not to be called till near breakfast-time. So I found myself alone, as I stepped into the deep, shady, front veranda, and took my first long and uninterrupted gaze at India. Yet not quite alone; a squirrel was seated on the edge of the steps, chirping familiarly to a friend who was peeping at me through the lattice-work with a pair of glittering little black eyes. Beyond the low white wall which bounded our compound, was the high-road; beyond that again, a green undulating plain, a village among trees, and, far away, low blue hills fading into the horizon. Our bungalow was large and straggling, embowered

in creepers (and notably with clusters of pale pink flowers, which were trailed round the pillars of the veranda); surrounded by several acres of short, green grass, a number of lofty trees, and many graceful shrubs of curious and dainty foliage, some covered with white, scarlet, and lilac flowers utterly unknown to me. The sandy avenue was edged at either side by enormous pots of lovely roses, trained over bamboo frames. Here, I recognised with great surprise, many old friends from Gallow—dark red, pale yellow, “Cloth of Gold,” and “La France”—in wonderful luxuriance, drooping their heads under the heavy morning dew. The air was cool and crisp, the world was awaking; various unfamiliar birds darted hither and thither; numberless odd insects boomed to and fro. A large and joyous riding-party, passing the gate, evidently mistook me for auntie, and waved me a merry salute. A pair of sleepy, cream-coloured bullocks were languidly drawing water from our well, superintended by a savagely-costumed youth, who loudly and bitterly remonstrated with his charges with unavailing energy. A handsomely-marked fox-terrier was yawning in the sun; whilst an impudent, dirty, complacent-looking poodle was stepping expectantly round two swarthy deft-handed servants, in snow-white garments, who were laying out a table with tea, toast, and fruit.

I was not long in adapting myself to my new life, and soon took my place quite naturally as the daughter of the house. My first impressions proved correct—I had indeed found a very happy home. I told my aunt everything about my life at Gallow; her face at once invited confidence, and soon she was mistress of all my secrets—which were not many—and of the full and true account of “grandfather’s bargain.” She listened to my recital with many interruptions of amazement, amusement, and indignation.

“He must have been mad,” she exclaimed, “or rather quite in his dotage! I never heard of anything so supremely ludicrous; a child of fourteen, solemnly betrothed, and promised in marriage before the lawyer and the parson!” And here she laughed so long and so heartily at the mere idea that the tears actually rolled down her cheeks. “The engagement is a dead letter; you will never hear of it,

much less of your cousin, again—with my consent," she added emphatically.

I, in my turn, became acquainted with some of the back chapters of my aunt's life. She showed me a sacred drawer, in which were locked away some well-worn little shoes, a tattered picture-book, and various broken toys.

"You have been sent to us, Nora, as the daughter of our old age," she said, as she replaced these relics with misty eyes; "who can be nearer and dearer to me now than my only brother's child?"

My aunt was a strikingly handsome woman, about fifty years of age, with well-cut features, very dark eyes, and a tall, well-balanced figure. Her genial, gracious manners, and kind heart, made her (although but little seen in society) one of the most popular people in Mulkapore. Her sphere was home; she was devoted to her garden, her poultry, and her dogs. Her ear was always lent to tales of want or distress; her ready hand and purse ever open to the needy or afflicted. Were people ill, Mrs. Neville nursed them; were they in trouble, Mrs. Neville consoled them.

Uncle Jim was in one respect the very opposite of his wife; he was of a roving nature, and never so happy as when his foot rested, not upon its native heather, but in its adopted jungle, shikarring big game. He was an inveterate sportsman and well-known dead shot. I used to tell him, that the veranda resembled nothing so much as a furrier's shop. Tiger and bear skins were nailed up in all directions; and over each doorway one was confronted by a stuffed head either of a bison, a sambur, or a nilghi. His own sanctum was quite a sight. Rifles of every pattern, game-bags, and cartridge-cases, abounded on all sides. His writing-table was strewn with powder-flasks, capping-machines, and bottles of Rangoon oil. The floor was covered with skins, the walls ornamented with heads; and, ranged on two shelves, in a prominent position, were rows of ferocious, grinning, bare tiger-skulls, and a pair of skeleton monkeys (that, for a long time, I was persuaded were the mortal remains of two native babies). Uncle Jim was a short, wiry, little man, with rather an austere expression—as befitted a magistrate—an expression merely lent to his face by a heavy gray moustache and high aquiline nose. In reality, he was the most indulgent of masters, husbands,

and uncles, and allowed his "impudent niece," as he called me, to pull about his skins and skeletons, and ransack his chamber of horrors to my heart's content, whilst he loaded cartridges, or related magisterial experiences. Some of these latter were really rather amusing.

Once upon a time, there was a native girl who was very ill; an experienced old woman was called in as doctor. "Nothing," she declared, "could save the patient, but one remedy," and that was as follows: All the jewels of her friends must be collected—the more valuable the better—and placed in a large chatty of water, and soaked for two hours. After this, the water was to be drawn off, and given to the patient to drink, and she would be cured on the spot! Without delay a quantity of gold and silver ornaments were collected and soaked, according to the prescription; at the end of the two hours the water was drawn off—the jewels were gone!—and, naturally, the old woman!

I was not long in falling into Indian ways and customs, and it soon seemed quite natural to hear Drugo's monotonous voice, "Half-past five, missy—tea ready;" and it would not be long before I was cantering down the ride with Uncle Jim. The horse I rode was an old gray Arab, handsome as a picture, a well-preserved elderly gentleman, who carried me capitally in spite of his years. Whilst we were riding, auntie took a drive round the shops, or round the cantonment—according as her lazy, fat, Pegu ponies Brandy and Soda felt disposed. When we returned, she was generally to be found among her roses and caladiums exhorting or rebuking the Mahlee, or feeding her squatty Burmese bantams and long-legged game-fowl. At eight o'clock we had chotah-hazree under a big tree in the compound; it consisted of tea, toast, seed-cake, and fruit, and was a kind of public meal, to which any passing friends invariably stopped, partook of tea, and related the local "gup." We breakfasted at ten o'clock, from twelve to two received visitors; at two we had tiffin. After tiffin auntie indulged in forty winks, and I generally curled myself up in a cosy chair and devoured a novel till five-o'clock tea made its appearance. After which we went for our evening drive to the band, to polo, to cricket-matches. Dinner at eight o'clock, a game of bôzique, a song or two, and bed.

I had been very kindly received by auntie's friends, and

although not yet strictly speaking "out," I knew nearly everyone in the station, and pleasant people and pretty faces were by no means the extraordinary rarity Mrs. Roper had led me to suppose. A young married lady whose husband was "away in the district" was alone in a small, poky, little bungalow, and very ill with low, wasting fever. Here was a case for auntie *of course!* The invalid was gently removed to the shelter of her own capacious roof, and tended by her with the most assiduous care; for days auntie was hardly ever out of the sick-room, and I was chaperoned by a neighbour who frequently took me out driving, and told me the history of everyone in Mulkapore to boot. Mrs. Gower carried a bunch of keys that unlocked numerous dark cupboards; and was on quite a familiar footing with all the tenant skeletons.

I did not like Mrs. Gower, and always felt a strong repugnance to go out when I saw her prancing gray ponies coming to the door; although she had a very smart turnout, and was a capital whip. She was a faded, *passée* looking woman, of about forty. I do not think she could ever have been pretty, although she had still very bright eyes, and a very elegant little figure; but at any rate she had now ceased to pose for a beauty, and had set up as a wit. She prided herself on the sharpness of her tongue, and indeed it was a most deadly weapon. Truly brave was the man—or woman—who dared to cross swords with *her*. She maintained a great reputation for snubbing people, and putting them down—ladies especially. To men she was much more tolerant; and at a ball or a band she was generally surrounded by scores of admirers, whilst far younger and prettier, but less *amusing*, women would be sitting solus.

No one cared to be in Mrs. Gower's black books, for from that moment their character was gone! Her tongue was utterly untrammelled by any regard for truth. She was superior to *facts*, and would invent, and set going, the most malicious and unfounded stories about anyone who had the misfortune to displease her.

All this I learnt afterwards; but even when I was quite ignorant of Mrs. Gower's peculiarities, I was conscious of a secret antipathy that I could barely conceal under a decent semblance of civility. My aunt—the most credulous person in the world, as far as people's good qualities were

concerned—believed no evil of Mrs. Gower ; but in her heart of hearts I think she was secretly afraid of her.

Mrs. Gower was a power in the place. She had taken a fancy to me, and to have declined her advances would have been a fatal mistake. Accordingly, twice a week at least, I was to be seen sitting beside her, taking a drive in her pretty little Victoria. We usually went into the country, avoiding polo or the band ; but once or twice we attended the latter, contenting ourselves, however, with slowly circulating in the outer ring, and not drawing up in the line of carriages. On one occasion one or two young men accosted Mrs. Gower, evidently bent on a chat and a lounge on the steps of her carriage.

"I'm not going to stop to-day," she said ; "you see I am shepherding this young lady," presenting me with a wave of her whip. "I am not going to bring her among all you black sheep—ta-ta !" she concluded, with an easy nod, again moving on. A large landau next boarded us, containing a surprisingly stout lady, whose beaming countenance surmounted three chins. She had very sensibly appropriated the whole back seat to herself. Facing her sat two very nice-looking girls, with dark hair and eyes, undoubtedly sisters. Mrs. Gower saluted the party with effusion. From her manner I supposed that they were her dearest and most intimate friends, but I was speedily undeceived.

"Did you *ever* behold such an old porpoise as Mrs. Barry ?" she said, as she once more moved on. "These half-castes have all a tendency to fat."

"But surely Mrs. Barry is not a half-caste ?"

"Is she not ? Much you know about it. Her mother was a Portuguese ayah, as black as my shoe."

"Well, at any rate those two pretty Misses Barry are quite fair."

"Fair ! You should see them on a cold morning—they are absolutely slate-colour !"

"It seems to me that every dark person is called a half-caste out here, Mrs. Gower !" I exclaimed indignantly. "Mrs. Fitzwilliam, Miss Carr, Mrs. Cooper, you say they have all what you call 'fourteen annas in the rupee.'"

"So they have," she returned decidedly, giving a wicked flick to the off-pony. "But at any rate you and I are above

suspicion ; console yourself with that fact. I am *much* too fair, thank goodness ! and as for you, who ever saw a half-caste with red hair ? ”

Here I beg most distinctly to state, that my hair was not, nor ever had been, *red*—it was a very dark auburn, something the colour of a copper beech. However, I swallowed the remark in silence.

“ Look at Mrs. St. Ubes,” pursued my companion eagerly—“ her *real* name is *Stubbs*, you know—and Colonel Mowbray Gore ! ” as a very smart Stanhope dashed by, in which a dark soldierly-looking man was driving a lady. I could not catch a glimpse of her face, as she was leaning back under the shelter of a large parasol, on which was emblazoned a huge monogram.

“ A most unscrupulous, dangerous woman, and an outrageous flirt,” said Mrs. Gower, nodding in the direction of the retreating parasol. “ She has four or five children at home, and I believe that she scarcely remembers their names or ages. She is a most unnatural mother ! However, some day Nemesis will arrive, heavy handed, in the shape of a couple of pretty grown-up daughters ; and she will have to subside into the background, and play the part of chaperon whether she will or not,” concluded my companion with a spiteful laugh.

The picture she had drawn was evidently very agreeable to her mental vision, for, for some seconds, she was silent—then she went on :

“ Colonel Gore is heir to a baronetcy and five thousand pounds a year, and is consequently a most desirable *parti*. All the maids and matrons in the place were on the *qui vive* when he arrived. But they had not a chance with Mrs. St. Ubes ! She appropriated him on the spot, and has kept him exclusively to herself ever since. She rides his horses, drives out with him, dances with him, and has completely established him as *l'ami de la maison*. She declares that Charley (her wretched hen-pecked husband) is so fond of him that they are like brothers. A likely tale ! ” concluded Mrs. Gower, with an incredulous sniff.

“ How beautifully the gardens are laid out ! what splendid crotons and orses there are ! ” I observed by way of commencing a new topic.

“ Yes, not bad. I call coming here, coming to the Zoo—



you see such an extraordinary and rare collection of creatures. There are the Dobsons" (with much animation), "drowned in debt. He is altogether in the hands of the soucars. I hear that they have not even enough ready money to pay their Bazaar bills, and the servants' wages, and not one of the shops will give them credit; and yet, look at their turn-out, and look at the Misses Dobson's dresses! Got out from London—unpaid for, of course. I call such people thieves and swindlers!"

It would have been worse than useless to have endeavoured to stem this current of universal denunciation. I sat by Mrs. Gower, feeling very hot and uncomfortable, as everyone who passed was in turn "told off." My chaperon was a very abundant talker; a listener was all she required. My occasional exclamations of horror, doubt, or deprecation merely amused her, and whetted the edge of her remarks.

"You sweet, unsophisticated little Paddy, you don't know what a wicked place you have come to! You had much better have stuck to your native village than have come to such a Gomorrah as Mulkapore. I want to go to the Post-office, so we must soon be moving off." Then bowing sweetly to a lady, she said: "You see that horrid woman, Mrs. Blank, that we have just passed, walking as usual with Dr. Fisher, and looking into each other's faces, as if they were lovers. Pah! it's disgusting, it makes me perfectly sick! Come, we'll go away, I can't stand it!" So saying, Mrs. Gower virtuously whipped up her ponies, and drove out of the gardens at the top of their speed.

This was my last drive with Mrs. Gower. My moral equilibrium was quite shaken, as I descended at my own door; and when, with flaming cheeks, and much righteous indignation, I related second-hand to auntie some of the interesting little historiettes to which I had just been listening, she was perfectly aghast.

"Do not believe one quarter of them, my dear child!" she exclaimed with great emphasis. "Forget everything you have heard as fast as possible. I knew that Mrs. Gower was fond of turning people into ridicule, and had a slight tendency to exaggeration; but this is really *too* bad, to try to poison your mind against the whole community.

No one fit to know—not a lady in the place!” proceeded auntie wrathfully. “What a deceitful, treacherous woman! You shall never drive with her again, Nora. In fact, now that Mrs. Warren is so much better, I shall take a short turn of an evening myself, so no offence will be given.”

Here was the keynote. No one dared to offend, or openly quarrel, with Mrs. Gower. Although generally held in the most profound detestation, she overawed everybody, and held them in slavish bondage, by her terrible weapon—her *tongue*.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### OUR NEIGHBOURS.

“Why lingereth she to clothe her heart with love?”—*Princess.*

MRS. GOWER (who always took excellent care of herself) was among the first who fled from Mulkapore at the earliest symptom of the hot weather. Those who remained on the plains were few and far between. During the months of March, April, and May, it certainly *was* warm. We had cuscus tatties in every available aperture, and punkahs going night and day. Only when the sun had quite gone down did we venture out for a breath of air; and it was not always to be had! Everything was hot; even one's clothes, when first put on, felt as if they had just come from being thoroughly well aired at the kitchen fire; water was invariably tepid, and, only for our daily supply of ice, I don't know what would have become of us. Colonel Keith lived in a small bungalow, about half-a-mile from ours. Three or four times a week he arrived to dinner, in his grass-green gharry, drawn by an old white “caster” that, thanks to his long neck, rejoiced in the name of “the Gander.” Colonel Keith filled the back seat of his gharry to admiration; and there was no concealing from oneself the fact that he was unusually stout. But somehow, when you came to know him pretty well, the impression faded, and he seemed the best-tempered, best-natured, most jovial, delightful, elderly gentleman you ever met in all your life; and there was not an ounce *too much* of him, in his friends' opinion. His fair, open countenance surmounted a massive double chin, his twinkling blue eyes beamed with perennial good-humour, and he was the possessor of a hand-grip that nearly dislocated your bones, and of a laugh that literally shook a room. He was exceedingly popular, *poor* as he was. He had the spirits and energy of a boy of twenty,

disguised in the outward rind of a stout elderly gentleman. He saw everything and everybody from the best point of view, and wore spectacles *coulour de rose*. Few men in his situation would have been so light-hearted. True, he had good health, and drew nine hundred rupees a month; but out of that sum he had to provide a home in England for an invalid wife, and to educate, feed, and clothe, three growing sons and two daughters. All this had to come out of his pay, and when remitted home, at a ruinous rate of exchange, very, *very* few rupees remained for Colonel Keith's own personal expenditure.

"A light heart and a light purse," he would say. "Here I am, a gray-headed, fat old fellow, living on two hundred rupees a month, in my old age, in the very same station where, as a youngster, I kept my three horses, a buggy, two Shikar camels, and tribes of servants, and lived on the fat of the land. Oh, those good old days! when gram was eighty measures for the rupee, food and lodging nominal prices, and Teddy Keith a gay young bachelor! To what have matrimony and age reduced me!" he would exclaim, laying his hands on his fat sides, and surveying his goodly proportions. "Make hay while the sun shines—there are evil days in store for you," he would say to various bachelors.

It was no uncommon sight to see him lie back in his chair, hold his sides, and laugh till he cried—laugh till the tears rolled forth from his eyes; and his anxious friends trembled lest he should go off in a fit of apoplexy. He was the repository of more jokes and confidences (matrimonial and monetary), than anyone else in Mulkapore; and his good sense was as proverbial as his good-humour. He and uncle had been school-fellows and brother-officers, and he was just as much at home in our house as in his own tiny, scantily-furnished bungalow.

We had neighbours living in the bungalows on either side of ours. To the left resided Major and Mrs. Towers and family—the latter consisting of seven small, noisy, ill-conducted olive-branches, whom their mother colonised among her friends as much as possible, constantly sending Boysie, and Rosie, and Teddy abroad to spend a long and happy day. Their mother was the laziest woman I ever met. She never rose before eleven o'clock, never did any

housekeeping—leaving all to her butler. He provided everything—even the children's clothes, which were gaudy and ridiculous to the last degree. Once a month he brought his little account to master, and master would swear and storm, and call him a thief and a swindler—epithets that Ramsawny received with many expostulations and salaams, and for which he recouped himself in hard coin of the realm.

Major Towers spent his afternoons at rackets, his evenings at whist, and very little time at home; indeed, home was not a particularly inviting place. The servants were lazy, dirty, and disorderly; a grimy maty would respond to visitors (after they had bawled themselves hoarse), bringing forth a cracked soup-plate for their cards. If "missus could see," you were shown into a gloomy, frowsy drawing-room, decked with undusted furniture, broken ornaments, and withered flowers; cobwebs descended from every corner, and dirt, and toys, and dogs, reigned supreme. Enter the lady of the house—handsome in a large, fair, phlegmatic style; her dress, and hair, and general appearance leading one to imagine that she had been recently dragged through a hedge backwards; her collar unpinched, her hands ringless, her hair untidy, and no pretty little softening details to complete her toilet. She was always exceedingly agreeable, most amusing and entertaining, and one almost forgot her squalid surroundings in the charms of her conversation. Being such very near neighbours of the Towers, we were subject to incursions from the juveniles at all times. Boysie, I am sorry to say, spent many of his leisure hours with us, and he was an *enfant terrible* of the first water. Auntie tolerated him, so did uncle, marvellous to relate; but *I* looked on his visits with anything but favour.

Our other near neighbours were a Colonel and Mrs. Fox, and their two grown-up daughters. Mrs. Fox had been a noted beauty in her day, and still possessed considerable remains of good looks. She had piercing dark eyes, and a well-cut aquiline nose, and was by no means averse to being reminded of her charms, plump and *passée* as she was. For years she had devoted herself to society, and society to her; and as her beauty waned she had called in money in large sums to her aid, trying to keep her footing against her more

youthful rivals by the means of magnificent dress and costly entertainments. Her husband went *his* way, ably assisting his wife to spend the contents of the family purse by the help of a string of third-rate race-horses. A large family of children had been drafted home at an early age, and kept at cheap boarding schools, and as much in the background as possible, whilst *pater* and *mater familias* pursued each their own line of amusement in the gorgeous East.

However, young people *will* grow up, and at length they found themselves obliged to give a home to two stout, plain girls, well on in their teens, and large, unpaid school bills outrivalled old, long-standing Indian debts. These young ladies had to be brought out, and that speedily, as two other equally well-grown sisters were rapidly "coming on;" and to keep them all at home was a feat even beyond Mrs. Fox.

Some of the most pressing bills were paid off, some of the least promising racers sold, and Colonel and Mrs. Fox made a second departure in life, as the heads of a large and partly visible family. They were now deeply involved in the soucar's hands; and the one great thing for Mrs. Fox to achieve was her daughters' speedy marriage—a feat she seemed to know how to set about accomplishing; and, in her girls' social successes, hoped to live her own youth over again.

But "Mossy" and "Tossy"—Millicent and Theresa—though stout, well-nourished looking young people, had no pretensions whatever to their mother's good looks. They were admirable dancers and tennis-players, lively, and agreeable, and were invariably voted "such jolly girls" by their admirers; but no dancing, or tennis-playing, or agreeableness, could make them otherwise than short, and stout, and plain. One of them, alas! had a snub nose; the other weak eyes. Nevertheless, their admirable mother did her duty by them nobly.

At first, each eligible bachelor colonel and major had a pressing invitation to "consider himself as one of the family," to drop in to dinner, tiffin, or chotah-hazree, at any time he pleased. This invitation not being seized upon with the avidity she anticipated, the wily parent transferred her interest to captains and well-allowanced subalterns. Mrs. Fox assumed a kind, motherly air, that captivated certain young men, especially if recently from home. She had a

friendly, solicitous way of asking after their mothers and sisters; she took an affectionate interest in their flannels and their health, their prospects and their pay. In short, these "dear gentlemanly boys" reminded her so forcibly of her own son—such a handsome fellow!—that she could not help feeling like a *mother* to them, and desired them to come in and out whenever they pleased, and to make themselves quite at home. Often, some foolish youth, fresh from the loss of his own home-ties, had taken Mrs. Fox literally at her word, and become quite confidential respecting his income and future prospects. She would figuratively rock and dandle all his suspicions to sleep, and make him over to the society of her dear, amiable girls, in order that they might exercise their fascinations upon their adopted brother. More than once, a proposal was the result; but, alas! "men were deceivers ever"—they love and they ride away; and although every nerve would be strained, although Colonel Fox invariably seized the earliest opportunity of asking a young man's "intentions," urgent private affairs or a long shooting excursion, in fact, prompt flight, had hitherto been the unfortunate conclusion of all the Misses Fox's *affaires de cœur*. Their partners had so frequently "revoked," that their matrimonial prospects occasioned their mother serious uneasiness.

The Fox family went out a great deal, and seldom had any time to spare for such humdrum people as aunt and uncle. They were more accessible during the hot weather, when nothing in the way of gaieties was going on; and evinced a short but flickering interest in me when my boxes of various very smart dresses arrived from home. They condescendingly borrowed patterns, tried on hats, and made themselves quite familiar with my wardrobe. If I had any garment that I fondly imagined was particularly becoming, they would exclaim, in one breath:

"Oh, don't wear *that*! You have no idea how hideous it makes you look. Don't wear blue! Pink and red are certainly your colours."

And I, silly goose, believed them, and hastened to act upon their advice. They distinctly approved of the seclusion in which I had been kept, and suggested to auntie that I should not come out for another season. "I looked so absurdly young; I could not be eighteen." Colonel Fox

had a daughter by a previous marriage, a girl rarely alluded to by her relations, and at present consigned to the keeping of an uncle in the north-west provinces, until the marriage of one of her step-sisters would make a vacancy for her in the family nest.

"Three girls are too much to chaperon," quoth Mrs. Fox; "and really if Ellen is as pretty as they say she is, she is sure to settle very well from her uncle's house!"

One day I was buried deep in a novel and an armchair in the drawing-room, when in came Mrs. Fox in a great state of mental excitement, bearing in her hand a letter. She did not notice me, but accosted auntie breathlessly:

"Dear Mrs. Neville, I've come over to you to tell you the news. Just had a letter from Dick's brother, and I know you'll be interested, as you knew her mother."

Auntie gazed in mild interrogation at her visitor, who had taken a seat in front of her, and sat with her hands on her knees and her topee on the back of her head, evidently in a state of the liveliest exultation.

"Just had this letter—read it," putting the envelope into auntie's hand. "It's about Ellen."

"I have not my glasses; will you tell me what it is about, and that will do as well?" said auntie sympathetically.

"Then I'll read it to you, my dear Mrs. Neville, with pleasure," returned her visitor, unfolding the letter with unction.

"Ellen—that's my step-daughter—has had a most excellent proposal of marriage. Hem—hem," reading the introduction to herself; then clearing her voice she said, "here's what my brother-in-law says: 'Young Green of the Fencibles has come to the scratch at last,' Richard will have his joke," she supplemented, colouring, and only that her pride and triumph carried all before it, she would have given us a revised edition of the missive in her hand. "He has been nibbling for some time, in spite of Ellen's stand-offishness and folly. He came to my office yesterday and proposed, asked for my sanction and yours. I made some little demur, as became an all-but parent. However, I closed the bargain, as I have made most searching inquiries, and hear he is a most prudent, sensible young man, with very good expectations from his father, who is in the wool



trade; he has an allowance of three hundred a-year and has *no* debts. He is not, strictly speaking, handsome—in fact, between ourselves, he is very plain; but you cannot expect everything, and I think that Ellen has done uncommonly well for herself. He is to speak to her to-day. I suppose I may take your consent for granted.”

“It seems most satisfactory,” said auntie, as Mrs. Fox folded up the letter. “Of course you will write and give your consent?”

“Write!” echoed Mrs. Fox. “I sent off a telegram the instant I had read the letter. Just four words in it—‘With all my heart.’ I expect another letter to-morrow or next day, telling me every particular. You cannot think how pleased I am! It is such a desirable thing to get one’s daughters well-married”—looking over in my direction, as much as to say, “it is quite time *you* were settled, young lady!”

Then Mrs. Fox and auntie commenced a discussion about trousseaux, which lasted for nearly an hour, and at last our visitor took her departure. Three days later the expected letter arrived, and Mrs. Fox brought it to auntie with a very long face. Alas, for her hopes and plans! Ellen would have nothing to say to Mr. Green, and he and his prospects had been absolutely and definitely rejected.

“I call it flying in the face of Providence,” said Mrs. Fox tearfully; “and Richard is furious, and says he won’t keep Ellen any longer, and is about to send her home without another week’s delay.”

I heard all this second-hand from auntie, and also that the dismay and indignation of Mrs. Fox were impossible to describe.

Within ten days Miss Fox arrived, and no doubt received a very tepid reception from her disappointed relatives. I took a great fancy to her at first sight. She was not the least like her step-sisters, but resembled her mother, auntie’s former school-fellow. She was rather small, and very slight and graceful, and had a nice, pleasant, but not exactly pretty face, grey eyes, an aquiline nose, and a very firmly-cut mouth; it was this resolute-looking mouth of hers that spoiled her beauty, and made people say, “What a determined-looking girl that Miss Fox is!” She was three

years older than I, and talked as if she was fifty, being, according to uncle, "a rock of sense."

We became great friends, and she was allowed to come over and spend a good deal of her time with us ; in fact, I have reason to believe that her sisters and step-mother were by no means ill-pleased to dispense with her society. For, in spite of all her endeavours to restrain them, her sisters' admirers *would* leave their lawful shrines, to offer up incense to their piquant and elegant-looking newly-arrived relation.

In due time I made my *début* at a grand ball at the Residency, and, though "I say it as should not," had a great success. My card was crammed before I had been ten minutes in the room, and I could have had three partners for every dance if so inclined.

Now that I was launched in society, I was invited everywhere with uncle and aunt. I went to balls, dances, dinners, and picnics, and enjoyed myself vastly. Uncle used to grumble and growl at being dragged about, and kept up till all hours, but in his heart I think he secretly liked it, and auntie too. I made all her caps, and arranged her lappets and laces, and provided uncle with dainty little button-holes. As I pinned one of these in his button-hole, preparatory to starting to some entertainment, he would say : "We *little* knew what we were saddling ourselves with when we took the charge of you, you spoiled puss." He would declare over and over again that I received far more attention than was good for me ; that my head (such as it was) was completely turned ; and that, for his part, for the life of him he could not discover what there was to admire in such a conceited, overbearing little flirt.

But I think that he and auntie were not ill-pleased to see their Nora surrounded by crowds of competitive partners, nor to hear her spoken of as "the beautiful Miss Neville, the belle of Mulkapore !" Yes ; I, the hideous toad, the ugly duckling, had really become the fine young swan that Mrs. Roper had predicted.

Although I had various admirers, my heart was still exclusively mine own ; it was perfectly immaterial to *me* who my partner was, as long as he was a good dancer or tennis-player, as the case might be. No one in the whole

world had it in his power to make my pulse beat one throb faster ; in fact, I began to question within myself whether I had an organ of that *particular kind* at all ! The instant any of my friends became in the least degree personal or sentimental, I used to be seized with an uncontrollable desire to laugh ; and laughing, we all know, is fatal to tender speeches, and always had the effect of bringing my cavalier's eloquent outpourings to an abrupt and indignant conclusion. Uncle Jim declared "that I was a hard-hearted mercenary little wretch, reserving my hand for some octogenarian old general, with many bags of rupees ;" and I would retaliate by ruffling up his grizzly locks all over his head, carrying off his *pince-nez*, or his cheroot-case, much to the indignation and amazement of our dignified butler, who, being a Mahommedan, sincerely despised all white woman-kind (except auntie), and did not half relish seeing his respected "sahib" treated with such off-hand familiarity.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE FUTURE IS FORESHADOWED.

LOOKING back dispassionately now on some of the "great events" of my life, I am often at a loss to understand how I became engaged to Major Percival, or rather, Major the Honourable Hastings Percival, to give him his full title. I drifted into it gradually; that was one thing certain. I did not love him; I did not wish to marry him; and yet, nevertheless, our engagement became *un fait accompli*, as he would have said himself, for he was very fond of interlarding his conversation with scraps of French.

For a whole year I had reigned as belle of Mulkapore, and, although I had numerous admirers, I was still unengaged. In vulgar parlance, I was still to be had. I was a little *difficile*, in fact. Various girls, without my pretensions to good looks, were either engaged or married, and recent arrivals raised their eyebrows in great surprise when they heard that I had actually been a year and a half in the station, and was *still* Miss Nora Neville.

More than one happy matron, when triumphantly announcing a daughter's engagement to auntie, would smile, and look significant, and say, "When may we hope to hear of a wedding from Longfield?"—the name of our house. I don't think auntie half liked the solicitude these ladies evinced on my behalf, although she smiled serenely and treated the matter as a joke.

"You know very well you don't want me to get married, you dear old lady," I would exclaim, tightly hugging her with my arm round her neck. "What in the world would you do without your Pussy? Mrs. King has been straining every nerve to get Miss Fanny settled, and so it's all quite natural and proper. But *you* have never made any efforts to get me off your hands, and if you did it would

be of no use, for I would not go," I concluded emphatically.

"I don't know what we should do without you, child," replied auntie, making a foolish and futile effort to straighten her cap. "But of course we cannot expect to keep you *always*. Some day or other Mr. Right will come, and you will go with him readily enough. And do you think we would stand in your way? No, indeed; your happiness will be ours."

"I *never* mean to marry—never, never, never; so put the idea entirely out of your head," I replied with great energy, kissing her on both cheeks and rearranging her head-gear.

"Very well, Pussy, time will tell," was her rejoinder, as she quietly resumed her knitting.

Time did tell. In two months' time we went to the hills; we migrated up to Ootacamund along with a large party from Mulkapore, all bent on avoiding the hot weather and enjoying a holiday among the blue hills. Colonel and Mrs. St. Ubes, Colonel, Mrs., and the Misses Fox, Colonel Keith and Mrs. Gower, were duly chronicled as among the fashionable arrivals at Smith's Hotel.

We rented a small furnished house, and having brought up our servants and the ponies, Brandy and Soda, were very comfortable, and soon made ourselves at home among the Todas. Ooty was very gay; there were no end of picnics, tennis-parties, and receptions, not to speak of various balls, and the Ooty hounds too afforded capital sport. I yearned to have a gallop with them, but having nothing nearer to a hunter than the pony Brandy, an obese and short-winded quadruped, I was obliged to put all thoughts of my favourite amusement out of my head. Ellen Fox was staying with us, and we contrived to make the time pass very agreeably. One day we were at a large afternoon reception in the grounds of Government House. We were seated on a rustic bench, chatting to Dicky Campbell and another of the West Shetlands, and watching the arrivals as they passed across the lawn, with most critical interest.

"There is Miss Benyon, the Bombay belle," I exclaimed, "that girl in the dark red Jersey costume," speaking to Lady Ellerton.

"So that is Miss Benyon is it?" returned Dicky, putting down the corners of his mouth. "I cannot say that I admire her. I agree with Mrs. Gower, who says she is so thin she reminds her painfully of a *famine coolie*."

"Mrs. Gower is much too fond of giving people names," I answered indignantly. "I think Miss Benyon has a very pretty slight figure, don't *you*, Ellen?"

But Ellen, instead of answering, exclaimed:

"Who have we here? Oh, Nora! do, *do* look at Mrs. St. Ubes! Is she not magnificent?"

Mrs. St. Ubes, escorted by a short, stoutly-built, aristocratic-looking man, and attended by her husband, was advancing majestically from the entrance, drawing all eyes on herself by the gorgeous hues of her attire—a Parisian combination of old gold and navy-blue satin, with toque and parasol to correspond.

"Do you know *who* the fellow walking with her is?" asked Dicky impressively.

"No, I do not," I was obliged to confess.

"Not to know him argues yourself unknown. Allow me to enlighten your Mofussil ignorance. He is no less a person than the Honourable Hastings Percival. A present political officer and future peer. Think of that!"

"Well, and what of it?" I asked disdainfully.

"You are not impressed; you are not over-awed? You are not dying to make his acquaintance?"

"Certainly not," I answered in a confident tone.

"Imprudent girl, you do not know what you are saying! He is a bachelor, a magnificent *parti*, the desire and despair of all the maids and the mammas in the three presidencies. A great catch, I assure you; and lady-killer of Indian-wide reputation. You will find that his appearance will grow on you" (encouragingly).

"I see nothing remarkable about him," I replied, as I scrutinised the subject of our conversation contemptuously. He was pacing up and down the lawn with Mrs. St. Ubes, who evidently carried him in her train with no small pride. He was a man of about forty-five, short and rather portly, with unusually dark, deep-set eyes. He held himself well, and had (without being at all handsome), a certain air that distinctly said: "I am somebody." He had dark hair and whiskers and a closely-shaven upper-lip, and equally closely-

shorn, square, blue chin. He was admirably turned out by a first-class tailor—his hat and coat seemed a part of his own arrogance, and simply to spurn competition. As he sauntered along, with his glass in his eye, keenly criticising his surroundings, and occasionally lifting his hat with a grandiloquent sweep, I mentally endorsed Dicky Campbell's opinion, viz. : "That he would be exceedingly sorry to buy Major Percival at his *own* price and sell him at *his* valuation ;" which, by-the-way, was a remark that I had heard made with regard to Dicky himself.

Two or three evenings later, I found myself *vis-à-vis* to the great man, at a large dinner-party. He was making himself most agreeable to his neighbour, a very pretty married lady. Nevertheless, I remarked that he sent more than one glance across the table in *my* direction, and that during dessert he had arranged his eye-glass so as to bring me well into focus. After dinner he was led up and introduced to me by Mrs. St. Ubes—with anything but a good grace. Having presented him, she evidently intended him to pass on to where an inviting lounge suggested a *tête-à-tête* ; but no such thing ! With a smile that displayed a superb set of teeth, my new acquaintance tranquilly sank into an easy-chair beside me, and began to converse in low, almost exhausted tones, on that never-failing topic, the weather. He was undoubtedly a dandy of the first water. His evening toilet was suggestive of studied care, his mere tie alone an achievement of which any man might well be proud ; and from his pearl solitaire to his shoe-bows, his "get-up" was above the most searching criticism.

I could see that he was by no means disposed to *undervalue* either himself or his opinions, and that he was accustomed to be the spoilt darling of society. I took good care not to indulge him in any way, but challenged his remarks, laughed at his sentimental speeches, and altogether treated him "*de haut en bas*," as he would have said himself. My temerity was a novelty that evidently amused and piqued him ; and he roused himself to be more and more agreeable, and really made some very pointed, witty remarks, at the expense of one or two of the company.

From an opposite coign of vantage, Mrs. St. Ubes surveyed our growing intimacy with cold disapprobation. On

my cavalier being called away to the piano, she saw our conversation interrupted with an expression of the liveliest satisfaction, and abandoning her seat and her companion, gravitated gracefully towards her accomplished friend.

Major Percival was a remarkably good pianist, and played one or two of Chopin's most difficult waltzes with a light, crisp touch, that bespoke a master of the instrument. Accepting the plaudits of the audience as a matter of course, he was about to leave the piano, when I was pounced upon and led out of my retreat, in order to oblige the company in my turn. I was not the least nervous about singing, but I hated playing my own accompaniments, and I gladly accepted Major Percival's offer, as he ran over the opening bars of my song with a practised hand. I sang one of Moore's melodies, and was rapturously encored. Then I sang "The Message," my companion playing that difficult accompaniment with as much ease as if he had been the composer himself. After song number two I insisted on retiring once more to my seat, whither, to Mrs. St. Ubes' great indignation, I was immediately followed by my new acquaintance. I could see that he was considerably impressed by my singing; indeed, he told me that with such a voice as mine I could make my fortune on the stage, that it was a gift to entrance *thousands*, and many other very fine things. He certainly had a way of talking to ladies that was very taking. He spoke as if for the time being "there was but one beloved face on earth, and that was shining on him;" and as if his listener, even were she plain, and elderly, was to him, for the moment, all-in-all. At first, I was completely and serenely indifferent to him. I believe my indifference acted as a spur, and goaded him into making unusual exertions to win my good opinion. He paid me "marked attention," according to experienced chaperons, and certainly gave me various distinguished proofs of his esteem and preference. At picnics he was invariably my escort, and climbing mountains and scrambling down precipitous paths together is doubtless conducive of a good deal of intimacy. Altogether I was flattered, *he* was fascinated, and we were the best of friends. There is something very gratifying to a young girl's *amour-propre* in receiving the confidences of a man much older than herself, and being waited on at all times and places



with the most assiduous attention. How was I to know that I was by no means the first of his fair confidantes, that his devotion was merely "a little way he had," and that many a disappointed maiden had proved to her cost that attentions and intentions were by no means synonymous terms with him? However, in my case he really *was* serious. He first broke the matter gently to auntie (with whom he was an immense favourite), and, after singing my praises in her sympathetic ear, and showing his intense appreciation of her treasure, he asked permission to appropriate it himself. Auntie gave him her cordial consent, and promised her warmest support. Here was indeed a match in every way worthy of her little girl—a charming man, wealthy, well-born, and sensible—no light-hearted, giddy, impecunious subaltern. Pussy would be the Honourable Mrs. Percival, and one day, oh—vision of greatness!—Viscountess Rodcaster! Happy, happy Pussy! To have spurned such a connection would be nothing less than tempting Providence. Aunt Neville would have been hardly human had she been able complacently to witness other girls, my contemporaries, making excellent and brilliant matches, whilst her beautiful Nora still enacted the part of the prettiest bridesmaid. Much as she loved me, and agonising as would be our parting, she was quite willing to surrender me to Major Percival, an unexceptional *parti*. To remain on, season after season, in the bosom of my own family, a determined young spinster (as I had more than once hinted was my intention), was not to be thought of. My celibacy would be a social disgrace, reflecting on the entire household.

This is how Major Percival proposed for me. We were walking home from a large morning concert, in the neighbourhood of Ooty. Auntie had driven, but uncle and I, and various others, preferred to return on foot. I was loitering behind, picking ferns out of the hedge, when I was suddenly joined by "my friend," as I called him when holding sweet converse with myself.

"I have been trying to get near you all the afternoon, and failed signally," he remarked; "you were regularly hedged in by your military admirers, and I have something very particular to say to you."

"Military admirers!" I echoed, stepping back into the

road, triumphantly bearing a large fern, root and all complete; "I was not aware that I had any," I answered serenely. "And what have you to say to me that is so important?" I added, with smiling innocence; for, that a man so many years older than myself could possibly be in love with me was an idea that never entered my brain! He liked me, and I liked him—that was all!

"I found important letters awaiting me last night; I am obliged to go to England on business of the greatest consequence, and I must go down the ghaut not later than Tuesday."

I was muttering something suitable and trite about our sorrow at his departure, when he suddenly interrupted me:

"Can't you think of something else I wished to say to you?" he asked with unusual significance.

I raised my head, and stared at him blankly.

"Nora," he said, "will you marry me?"

## CHAPTER XIX.

PRETTY MISS NEVILLE IS ENGAGED AT LAST.

Be wise to-day, 'tis madness to defer.—*Young.*

I FELT a shock, a shock as if a large bucket of ice-water had been suddenly dashed over me. I stood still, in the middle of the road—fern in hand—stupefied and speechless. So *this* was what he called friendship! Had I heard aright? My ears had not deceived me.

"You will marry me, won't you, Nora?" he repeated, somewhat abashed by the undisguised amazement reflected in my ever tell-tale face.

"Surely you have known my feelings this long time? Make me happy; say you will be my wife."

"Impossible," I answer, blushing furiously.

"And why impossible?" eagerly.

"I thought you only cared for me as a friend?"

"A friend? Pshaw! I fell in love with you across the dinner-table the first night I ever saw you! There is no such thing as friendship between a man like me and a girl like you; it must be love or nothing."

"But you said you were my friend," I persisted.

"Yes, very true; friendship is the beginning of love, the outworks of the citadel. And now, Nora, tell me, my dear little girl—do you care about me—do you love me?"

"No, I do not; no, certainly I do not," I reply with great resolution and flaming cheeks.

"But you like me," he answered unabashed. "Your auntie told me that I might—hope. I have *her* best wishes in the matter. Nora, surely you will listen to me; with even liking I will be content to commence with."

"I—do like you—I like you very much—better than any other man except uncle—but I do not love you," I stammered.

"If you love no other man, that is enough for me ; you are sure there is no one you care about ?" he asked in a calm judicial manner.

"No one," I answer firmly.

"Then you will marry *me*, Nora—liking will soon ripen into love," he urged in a tone of subtle persuasiveness.

"But I do not want to marry anyone," I replied with a weebegone face, and on the very brink of tears. Surely no one would guess from my face and attitude that a heart and coronet were figuratively at my feet !

"Oh, come now, you know that's all nonsense. Some day you will marry, as a matter of course. Shall I give you a day to think of it, Nora ? Shall I come for my answer to-morrow ?" said Major Percival, standing right before me, with an air of resolution, and an inflection in his voice, that told me he was a determined man, and one not to be denied.

"Very well," I faltered, eagerly grasping at the proffered delay.

"You can talk it over with your aunt" (oh, crafty Major Percival !), "and this time to-morrow I will come for my answer ; you don't know how anxious I will be, nor how I shall be counting the minutes till I know my fate. May I walk home with you now ?"

"No, not on any account," I answer pettishly. "I see uncle coming this way," casting my now discarded fern among the bushes. "I will go with him ; I want to be alone, and to think. You have taken me so much by surprise."

I kept my word ; I thought a great deal. I lay awake for hours, revolving the matter in my mind. Major Percival was much older than I was, and I did not love him ; but many marriages were exceedingly happy, despite disparity of years, and I asked myself, over and over again, could I love *anyone* ? Was I not, although hot-tempered and impulsive in everyday matters, of a really cold and undemonstrative disposition ? It was a magnificent match. Auntie's heart was set upon it. She had talked to me eloquently for hours before I went to bed, and discussed Major Percival's character, his position, and my prospects of happiness, and had summed up ; and, in her opinion, the verdict should be, *Yes*.

"Think, my darling girl, if anything were to happen to us, how alone in the world you would be, without any near relatives, without any man of your own kith and kin, to take care of you, and look after you."

I thought of Maurice, and became crimson.

After all I made up my mind to say "Yes;" and "Yes" I did breathe in Major Percival's rapturous ear when he came to hear his fate, that lovely April afternoon, in our dim jessamine-scented drawing-room. But—there were conditions.

"I have some stipulations to make, Major Percival," I said, as he took me by both hands, and drew me towards him.

"Anything, everything, to the half of my kingdom," he exclaimed gaily.

"The first is, that our engagement remains unknown to any, save our immediate relations, for the next six months—in case we should change our minds."

"I agree. I shall be in England all the time," he answered cordially. "But my mind can know no change."

"At the end of that time, you can come and see us at Mulkapore, and the matter may be made public; but I shall not marry you for at least a year."

"I agree to that also—though I think it is rather hard lines."

"And the third is——" becoming crimson, and breaking down altogether.

"Is—what? Something easier than the last, I hope."

"Do not think me very foolish, or be very angry with me; but I have a nervous horror—of—of—of" (making a superhuman effort and bringing out my words with a gasp)—of any man kissing me."

"But I am different," returned Major Percival, boldly putting his arm around my waist.

"No, no, you are not," I answer, scarlet and trembling; "if I thought you—would—I should dread every time I saw you."

Major Percival's sole answer was to put his hand under my chin, turn my face towards his, and, before I could move, without a word of warning, the dreaded kiss had become a hateful fact. It was (needless to remark), the first time a man had ever laid his lips on mine. I struggled,

I shuddered, I tore myself from his arms, and, casting myself down on a couch, buried my face in the cushions, and burst into a storm of tears—tears of shame and terror. I wept and sobbed so long and so bitterly that my betrothed was beside himself with amazement and consternation.

He came and sat by me, smoothed down my rumpled auburn locks, and overwhelmed me with fond epithets and endearments, and vague apologies; but I was deaf as the traditional adder to all his caresses; and he was almost at his wits' end.

"If I never kiss you again without your leave, Nora, will you be satisfied?" he asked at length, in a low voice; "never again without your permission."

"Promise," I repeated, raising my tear-stained face and sitting upright, but averting my eyes.

"I give you my word of honour," placing his hand in mine. There was a long pause. At length my sobs cease, and Percival broke the silence: "You little goose," he said reproachfully; "well, I give in. I know I am a great fool for my pains; but I agree to all the conditions. And now, Nora" (looking at me with the air of a triumphant proprietor), "now—you and I are engaged to be married."

"Yes?" I answered, with a watery smile.

"Here is your ring," producing a little blue velvet case. "I brought it on chance," he added apologetically, displaying a splendid sapphire and diamond marquise ring, and placing it on the third finger of my left hand.

"But I do not wish to wear it yet; we are to do nothing—nothing decided, for six months," I answered hastily.

"Oh, you have given me your word; and there is no going back. You belong to me," he replied firmly. "You don't know how proud I am of you, Nora. I felt the very first time I ever saw you that you were just the style of girl that I would like to make my wife. You are so aristocratic-looking; your lovely face would adorn the highest position; your manners are so natural and so fascinating; and yet there is a tinge of hauteur about my little Nora that will sit very well on Mrs. Hastings Percival," he concluded complacently.

The few days intervening between the morning of Major Percival's departure, he spent almost entirely with

us. We walked together, sat out in the garden together, and did a considerable amount of talking together; but there was no more kissing. My *fiancé* was evidently well pleased with his betrothed, and I felt it quite possible that we would be a very happy couple. My future husband!—how odd it sounded—was clever, gentlemanly, much sought after, and evidently very much in love with *me*.

I had but little sentiment in my composition; and no scenes of hysterics, smothered sobs, or wild protestations need be expected from me when the wrench of parting came. I was sorry—moderately sorry—I was really surprised and ashamed within myself that I did not feel the leave-taking more acutely. I saw my lover whirled away in a Madras carrying company's carriage, whilst I stood at our gate waving my handkerchief with tearless eyes. It was not proper; it was not natural; "my heart is as hard as granite," I said to myself reproachfully as I turned away and walked slowly towards the house.

A few days later I likewise went down from Ooty—an engaged young lady, in the charge of a very complacent chaperon. During the long down-hill drive, thirty-four miles, I had ample time for reflection, and by the time we had changed horses at Kular, I had thoroughly and minutely reviewed my career during the past three months; and came to the conclusion that, on the whole, I liked Major Percival as well as I could possibly like anybody; and that I was—as auntie said—an extremely fortunate girl.

True, uncle could not endure him, but that was mere narrow-minded prejudice. He declared that "Major Percival could not hit a flying haystack, nor ride a dhoby's donkey! The fellow is too old; he is a dandy," he added, "and not the sort of husband I would choose for my little Nora!"

"I suppose if *she* is satisfied, that's the main thing," said auntie pointedly.

"Oh, of course, of course; but, all I can say is, that there's no accounting for tastes," he retorted, as he once more subsided behind the *Pioneer* newspaper.

It was a cruel trial to auntie that the engagement was to be kept quiet, and not immediately blazoned forth. But I was firm. I had Major Percival's consent, and that was

sufficient, and the matter was to be buried in silence, for the present.

"And why?" asked auntie irritably.

"Because I wish for a whole six months' freedom before I am branded as that public curiosity, an engaged young lady—who is to have no more social cakes and ale, and is supposed to care for nothing but love-letters and the moon!"

The day following our return, Mrs. Fox (who had preceded us to the plains) came stepping over the wall connecting our compounds, thirsting for news, but news there was none! There was evidently *no* engagement; Major Percival's name was not even mentioned in the course of conversation; and as I looked fagged and haggard (after our long journey), she immediately leapt to the welcome conclusion, that I had been very badly treated. She veiled her condolences but scantily; talked in a general way of unprincipled male flirts engaging girls' affections (gazing impressively at me with an air of grieved interest), and then leaving them in the lurch!

"Dear Mrs. Neville," she said, pressing auntie's hand, as she was leaving, and looking into her face with deep compassion, "*I* know what it is; I can feel for you sincerely. You remember that terrible business of our Mossy's, and the unpardonable way Major Walker——"

"Really, Mrs. Fox," interrupted auntie, colouring, and drawing herself up, "I am at a loss to understand you; there is no occasion for your sympathy, I am happy to tell you."

"Oh, of course, of course; keep it as quiet as possible!" returned the irrepressible matron, nodding her head with indescribable significance, and backing towards the door. "But indeed I feel for you, although you will not trust an old neighbour like me." So saying, she hastily departed, in a high state of jubilation; and before auntie could recover her tongue, or her presence of mind, our compassionate visitor was already over the adjoining wall and back in her own domain.

"It is too bad, really quite too bad! I shall certainly tell her of your engagement, Nora," said auntie, pacing the room in great excitement; "such commiseration is not to be tolerated."

"No, no!" I exclaimed eagerly. "Remember your



promise; and if you tell her, you may just as well announce it in the *Mulka-pore Herald*. I'm sure I don't mind; I thing it is a capital joke."

"A joke!" echoed auntie. "Well, I fail to see the point of it. Now here comes Mrs. St. Ubes," as a close carriage drove under the porch. "Look here, Nora," said auntie decisively, "I shall certainly tell *her*. She is a friend of Major Percival's, and she ought to know; and she shall," giving her cap a tug to emphasise the fact.

I had no time to remonstrate; Mrs. St. Ubes was already sailing languidly into the room, an elegant vision of cream surah and crimson. She, too, came to condole; and was possessed with an insensate craving for "hill news;" having also preceded us to the plains.

After a little desultory talk about our journey, the heat, the dust, the people who were still at Ooty, and the weddings that were, and were *not*, coming off, she casually inquired for Major Percival.

"*He* did not leave his heart behind him, at any rate. He is a shocking flirt, I can tell you, Miss Neville, and never means anything; as no doubt you *know*. But he is quite too charming, is he not?" she remarked to me in her most pointed manner.

I did not know exactly what to reply.

"*He* is one of those gay cavaliers who love, and then ride away. Ha, ha! I hope you kept a tight hold of your heart?" she proceeded, with an air of would-be graceful *badinage*.

Auntie now came into action, and, in spite of my nods and signs, speedily declared the real state of affairs.

A stare of the rudest incredulity was the only answer she received to her announcement for nearly sixty seconds. Evidently, it was not agreeable intelligence to our fair visitor. She became very red, then very white. At length she found words, and asked, with a little hysterical laugh, "Are you in earnest, Mrs. Neville?"

Auntie replied in a tone that must have carried conviction to the most disbelieving.

"Then it is really all settled," returned Mrs. St. Ubes, who had now recovered her usual colour and her presence of mind. "All settled," she reiterated, eyeing me with a look of deadly import.

"Yes, quite settled," replied auntie, almost humble in her triumph.

"Well, it is certainly a magnificent match for your niece," observed Mrs. St. Ubes, in a tone that King Cophetua's relations might have used when speaking among themselves of his betrothal.

"You must feel yourself of some importance *now*, Miss Nora," turning to me; "may your former acquaintances presume to touch the hem of your garment?"

"It is not to be known to anyone in the place," I answered composedly.

"But knowing you were such a friend of Major Percival's," interrupted auntie, "I thought you ought to be let into the secret, as I was certain that you would be pleased to hear of Nora's good-fortune." Oh simple-minded, single-hearted auntie!

Mrs. St. Ubes glared at her hostess during this most unfortunate speech.

If her face was any index to her feelings, her pleasure was imperceptible to the naked eye; to tell the truth, she was in a highly volcanic state—a condition the laws of good-breeding, and a colossal outlay of self-command, alone enabled her to restrain. Turning to me with a forced smile, she said:

"Well, I *hope* you will be happy," in a tone of voice that expressed the gravest doubt. "You may rely on me. Your little *story* shall not go any farther," rising. She threw vast emphasis into the word *story*, and accompanied the thrust with a look baffling all description. "I suppose we shall see you at the band this evening, Mrs. Neville?" she said, kissing auntie with an appearance of almost filial affection; and patting me on the shoulder, with an air of negligent patronage, she marched off, drums beating, colours flying, and in fact with all the credit of an honourable retreat.

Major Percival had no associations in my mind connected with Mulkapore; and at times I could scarcely believe that I was engaged to him. My weekly letter, and auntie's occasional remarks alone reminded me of the fact. I liked him! Yes, I liked him very much indeed. I was proud of having been singled out by so intellectual and popular a man; but I was not one atom in love. They say that

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder;” but time and distance had had no effect upon mine. The fact was, I could not be “in love” with anyone; it was not my nature, I told myself over and over again. The love of which I read in novels was simply as unintelligible to me as one of the dead languages. Different people had different dispositions, I told myself; and although I was impulsive and readily carried away by anger, grief, or joy, I was really and truly of a cool, unimpressionable character. My surroundings as a child had withered up my tenderest sensibilities. I had had neither father, mother, sister, nor brother, and the affection I would have gladly bestowed on grandfather or Miss Fluker, had been to a great extent returned on my hands. So I had grown up a hardened little creature—not that I was this by nature—but simply because no one cared two straws whether I loved them or not. Now that I had some scope for my feelings, they were not readily forthcoming. If I had been asked whom I cared for most in all the world—on my word of honour—I would have said auntie first, and then, perhaps, Major Percival; but even of this I was not very sure.

## CHAPTER XX.

### CAPTAIN DERESFORD'S PHOTOGRAPH.

Look here upon this picture.—*Hamlet*.

IT must not be thought that I had forgotten old friends all this time. I constantly wrote to Deb and Mrs. West, and through them sent suitable presents to Patsey, Dan, Sweetlips, and big and little Mary. These gifts were made anonymously, of course ; but I think their recipients were at no loss to guess where they came from. There had been a tremendous hue and cry raised on my behalf, and without the smallest success. Dan admitted having driven me to the station, and there the trail failed ; in spite of the united exertions of Miss Fluker, Mr. French, and the *police*, I had completely and mysteriously disappeared.

One morning, coming in from the garden, I found auntie and uncle in close and solemn conclave over a letter ; it had evidently been under discussion for some time, and the court was preparing to rise as I entered.

"I suppose there is no help for it," muttered uncle grumpily ; "you had better write and say that the sooner she comes the better. Vane is an old friend of mine, and I could not refuse hospitality to his wife, although she is a giddy young girl by all accounts, and he made a regular fool of himself. We have an empty spare room, and she is welcome to it !"

"Who is coming ?" I asked eagerly, tossing off my topee, and drawing up a chair.

"A young married lady—the wife of Colonel Vane, a great friend of ours ; we have never seen her, but I believe she is young and pretty," replied auntie.

"And why is she coming here ?" I asked, getting to the point as usual.

"Because Colonel Vane is obliged to go to England on

business, and he does not like to leave her at Lucknow all alone ; and he dreads taking her home in winter, as she has a delicate chest."

There was very little information to be had about our visitor. Aunt and uncle knew nothing about her, excepting that she was many years younger than her husband ; and that every one was amazed when Colonel Vane (a confirmed old bachelor) had taken to himself for wife a pretty girl twenty-five years his junior.

I was on the tiptoe of expectation till the appointed day came and our guest arrived. Uncle met her at the station, and auntie and I in the porch. She stepped out of the carriage, a very elegant, neat figure—very far from the grimy object I was, when I made my first appearance at Mulkapore. How she contrived to keep herself so clean amazed me ; but I afterwards learnt that she was much indebted to a thick veil and dust-cloak. Mrs. Vane was very small, and slight, and dark, and had the prettiest and most impertinent little nose (*not retroussé*) I ever saw ; she had quantities of beautiful brown hair, and wore a thick, curly fringe. She looked quite young, not more than four-and-twenty, and rumour had not misled us—she *was* remarkably pretty. She was dressed in a dark navy-blue cambric, thickly trimmed with many quillings, edged with the fashionable coffee-coloured lace. Yards of the same encircled her throat, coquettishly fastened at one side by a silver crocodile brooch, and on her slender wrists were dozens and dozens of bangles. She, I think, took us all in, with one rapid glance of her roving dark eyes ; and she afterwards imparted to me confidentially that her first impressions were decidedly in our favour.

She soon made herself quite at home, and was no restraint or trouble in the house ; but on the contrary, a great acquisition. Joking with uncle, helping auntie in her garden, and assisting me in rearranging the drawing-room, and contriving striking new "effects" in the disposal of flowers, pictures, and furniture, occupied the first few days. She readily learnt all our family jokes, the names of most of the servants, and established herself on a footing of friendly intimacy with the dogs. She was not long in making numbers of acquaintances, and her lively, attractive

manners, and pretty face, were a first-class passport to universal popularity. She was certainly an oddity in some ways. The very pink of propriety in society, and under auntie's eyes—when alone with me she “broke out,” as she called it, and indulged in slang, and all sorts of expressions hitherto foreign to my ears; and in short, in the privacy of my room, or hers, she was extremely fast, and gloried in “shocking me,” as she called it. My dressing-room, of an afternoon, was her favourite lounge, and she favoured me with a great deal of her society; and, thanks to auntie's forty winks, every day after tiffin we enjoyed a long and uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*. Extended at full length on my sofa, she gave me her opinion gratis of men and manners. She was not the least reticent about herself, or her affairs, and exacted equal frankness from me.

“I like the name of Nora Neville,” she remarked one day; “it goes with quite a swing. Where did you pick up the name of Nora?—feminine for *Noah*, of course. I think I'll call you Noah—shall I?”

I vainly begged that she would do nothing of the kind.

“Oh yes, I really must. You might have come out of the ark, you are so preposterously antediluvian in some ways, and behind the present age four thousand years at the very least.

“Noah Neville is your name,  
And Ireland is your nation,  
Mulkapore your dwelling place,  
And *I'm* your admiration.

“Is not that the case?” she asked, looking at me complacently. Without pausing for an answer she said: “Now tell me all about your Irish home;” evidently preparing herself for a long session.

“There's nothing to tell!” I replied briefly, not raising my eyes from my crewel-work. “I came out to India when I was seventeen.”

“And were wrecked *en route*. How funny!”

“Anything but funny, I think you would have found it,” I replied gravely.

“Well, and tell me, have you any particular friend in Mulkapore—any *cher ami*?” she asked insinuatingly.

“No, not one,” I answered with perfect truth.

"What, not one? Oh, come now—think again!"

"If I thought till doomsday, I could not conjure up the sort of friend you mean. I hate Platonic friendships," I remarked with great emphasis, and giving my wool a jerk that broke the thread.

"Of course I know that you are engaged. The intelligence was strictly masonic. But even so, why not amuse yourself *pro tem.*? 'When the cat's away the mice will play.' My! what a picture of virtuous indignation! Only I am quite too comfortable, I would fetch you a looking-glass. Look at me, I have half-a-dozen dear little bow-wows—*moi qui vous parle*," patting herself complacently.

"Then more shame for you," I retorted with more than ordinary warmth.

"Ha—ha—ha! You amuse me immensely. I should not be a bit surprised if one day you were the *death* of me," she went on, still cackling to herself. Then clasping her hands behind her head, and surveying me lazily, she said: "Why should I not have my little pack? Don't you know that flirting (harmless flirting) is the privilege of the married women? My dear old hub has his amusements, his little game, his big shooting, and I have mine—my little game, my big shooting. I bring down a brigadier just as he does a bison, only my spoil is not mortally wounded. It never does anyone any vital harm to admire *me*."

"I don't understand you," I said stiffly.

"*Quite* shocked, I declare. Well, then, she sha'n't be shocked; such a good, prim, little girl, she shall look at nice, pretty, proper pictures, she shall."

"I really wish you would leave me alone, Mrs. Vane," I exclaimed, half laughing, half crying.

"No, indeed. I have a rich treat in store for you, you ridiculous pre-Adamite. I am going to show you my album, and to introduce you to all my friends," she said, unlocking, as she spoke, a very handsomely bound album. "Put away your work and your book, and come a little closer to me and enlarge your ideas."

"Why do you never read yourself, Mrs. Vane? I never see you open a book," I remarked, reluctantly putting away a magazine into which I had intended to dip during the afternoon.

"Oh, I *hate* reading; my only book is the great book of Nature, and tragedies and comedies in real life my only study! Now, attention; I am conferring an enormous favour on you, if you only knew it. It is not everyone that has the privilege of seeing my photographs.

"This is Horace Fuller, of the Navy Blue Dragoons; such a flirt, my dear"—throwing up her eyes—"but, nevertheless, a sincere admirer of yours truly. This is Sir Fortescue Brown, such an old duck; here, opposite, is Alymer Byng—he is dead, poor fellow! This woman with the muff is a Mrs. Burton, who sets up for a professional beauty; she has a good deal of nerve, has she not? She has a face exactly like a cat's head done in coarse worsted."

And so on, and so on, we passed in review the contents of the album. There was a remark to be made about every photo, and to most there hung a tale. At length we came to the last page. Taking up an envelope that lay inside the cover, Mrs. Vane said: "Oh, here it is! I could not make out where I had put it. Now, my sweet, unsophisticated little friend, prepare yourself for the *bonne bouche*. I am now," she continued oratorically, "about to introduce you to the showman of the Horse Artillery, such a handsome fellow, quite too, too good-looking; a splendid rider, a perfect dancer, in fact, good at everything all round—rackets, cricket, shooting. Not much of a ladies' man as yet, it is true, but, with a little training, he will fetch and carry nicely."

"And what is the name of this remarkable, too good-looking gunner?" I asked carelessly; "Crichton the second?"

"No," she replied, taking the photo out of its envelope, gazing at it for a second, and then solemnly putting it into my hand. "His name is *Captain Maurice Beresford*."

"What on earth are you blushing about?" she asked, suddenly catching a view of my brilliant cheeks. "Surely you are not affected to blushes by this mere photo? I know you have never seen him, as he has been in Bengal for the last five years. What are you getting so red for, eh?"



"I—I—I'm *not* red," I stammered. "How can you be so absurd?"

"Well, you certainly had a sudden effusion of blood to the head. Whatever was the cause? Is he not handsome? Can you wonder now that he has broken half the girls' hearts in Lucknow?"

"I thought you said he was not a ladies' man?" I interposed quickly.

"Neither he is—at any rate not a marrying man. Oh dear me! I wish his battery was here. There was some talk of a move. I wish you could see him, Nora—I know you would like him."

My first astonishment over, I collected my scattered wits, and stooping to pick up Mrs. Vane's thimble, said:

"And where is this—Captain—Beresford now?"

"Oh—up in the front. The foremost in the fray. He has been doing all manner of fine things and winning laurels by the cartload. There is some wonderful story about him running along the roof of a house with a lighted fuse in his hand, and throwing it down among the enemy; quite an Homeric exploit! He carried his life in his hand that time, did he not? Whenever I hear of these rash and reckless deeds on a man's part I always say to myself, 'The more fool you!' I should make but a poor soldier. I know I should bolt at the first shot. Self-preservation is the first law of nature; what do you say, Nora?"

"I do not think I should run away; running away entails a show of moral courage that I do not possess. After all one can die but once!"

"Ah! No doubt *you* would fight; your savage Irish instincts would enjoy a good shindy, and battering and belabouring people, and trailing your coat, etc. But don't bring your latent powers to bear on *me*, whatever you do. Captain Beresford is half Irish, and that accounts for his taste for powder! My tactics would resemble those of the Kerry recruit on the field of battle. I have a holy horror of firearms. He says:

"The bullets was thick, and the powder was hot,  
But I didn't fire for fear I'd be shot.

"I think that is a lovely idea, is it not? My heavens! here is the carriage coming round; I must scuttle off and

dress ;" and, suiting the action to the word, she sprang off the sofa, and seizing her crewel-work, wool-bag, and album, rushed hastily out of the room.

I had by no means heard the last of Maurice ! Mrs. Vane constantly spoke of him. He was very intimate at her home in Lucknow, and his mother and Colonel Vane had been distantly connected.

"He set great store by the old lady, and was always talking about her," remarked Mrs. Vane during another of our afternoon siestas. "He was terribly cut up, when she died last year, and went nowhere for months, excepting to our house. I must tell you a funny story he told George, and of course I heard it afterwards, as my dear old man keeps nothing from me, nor I from him."

"Perhaps it is private, and you ought not to tell me," I exclaimed, anxious to postpone the topic.

"Private ! Nonsense ! As *you* don't know the parties in question, there is not the slightest harm, and really it is a most romantic anecdote. George was chaffing him about some girl—only in fun, of course—and, my dear Noah, he took it up quite seriously, and told George that he never could marry, and the reason. Quite a family romance, I can assure you ; shall I tell it to you ?"

"If you like," I answered indifferently, sitting well back in the shade of the window curtain, and making a feint of working.

"He has only *one* near relation in the world, this happy, lucky man—a cousin ; and as the family property—probably a bog—could not go to her, and she had not a shilling to jingle on a milestone, their mutual grandfather, or uncle, made Captain Beresford promise to marry her—a nice little arrangement, was it not ?"

An inaudible muttering was my only reply.

"She, the *fiancée*, was an unformed, uncultivated child of fourteen at the time. Well, the old man died, and the girl lived on at the family place, till about a year ago, when, one fine day, some busybody, for want of something to do, told her that she was a pauper, living on sufferance, and that her cousin had been bound over to marry her willy nilly. Her grand old Irish pride was instantly in arms, of course, and without the common courtesy of an adieu to her neighbours, much less P.P.C. cards, she disappeared bodily, in

fact ran away. I suppose they dragged all the bog-drains, but at any rate she was nowhere to be found. Is it not quite a romantic story?" asked Mrs. Vane, pausing abruptly and turning towards me.

"Oh, very."

"I never met with such a matter-of-fact, uninterested old Noah. I don't believe you were even *listening*."

"I was of course. Pray go on."

"At first people thought that the young lady had gone off to America; and there was even a rumour that she had been shipwrecked and drowned. But no such luck was in store for Captain B. A month or two after her flitting, a letter was received from his betrothed, announcing her existence; and that she had found a very happy home. The artful minx had had the letter posted in London."

Of course I had. I had enclosed it in one of my effusions to Deb.

"She must have been a strong-minded, determined sort of girl, must she not, and rather clever too, going off in that way, without leaving a trace behind?" said Mrs. Vane, looking at me interrogatively.

"Yes, I suppose so, I don't know," I answered mechanically. "And the cousin, was he in great affliction when he found that his affianced bride had taken French leave?"

"*That* I cannot tell you. I fancy she was a wild, head-strong sort of girl, with nothing to boast of either in the way of beauty or manners. Nevertheless, he still considers himself bound to marry her, if he can find her."

"And if she will have him," I put in rashly.

"Oh, there is not likely to be an *if* to that question," resumed Mrs. Vane, with an air of tranquil superiority. "The little idiot never knew what she was running away *from*. He is not merely awfully good-looking, but so nice, and so gentlemanly, everyone likes him—men and women alike——"

"And is certain to be a conceited ape," I added, rudely completing her encomiums. "I suppose he never found a trace of this wild Irish cousin?" I continued boldly, and now playing the part of interested auditor to admiration.

"Not the faintest clue. I dare say she is a slavey in some London lodging-house; and if that is her fate, all I can say is, that she richly deserves it. What is your opinion?"

My opinion was expressed in a sudden and utterly uncontrollable fit of laughter; laughter I could not possibly restrain. I laughed from sheer nervousness, and nothing else. The more Mrs. Vane ejaculated and exclaimed at my unaccountable fit of mirth, the more I gave way to it. At length, completely exhausted, I dried my eyes, and picked up my work, Mrs. Vane gazing at me in open-mouthed amazement.

"My good old Noah!" she cried, "you are crazy; you *must* have a slate off! Whatever possessed you to laugh so immoderately at nothing? Are you often taken like this?" gazing at me in blank amazement, and dropping her crewels.

"I cannot tell," I answered, reddening in spite of myself. "Very little amuses me, as you know. Tell me, Mrs. Vane, what would *you* have done in that girl's case? Would you have stayed?"

"Certainly I would," she returned promptly. "Especially if I had the smallest *souppçon* of the entire desirability of my future husband. Never quarrel with your bread and butter; it never answers. Be sure that that young person has long ago repented her foolish proceeding in sackcloth and ashes. And now tell me what you would have done, my unromantic, prudent Noah? Let us have your ideas on the subject."

"I would have done exactly what she did," I answered firmly.

"Not *you*!" responded my friend emphatically. "You are much too prosaic a young lady."

"Not so prosaic as you imagine," I replied with unusual decision. "The best thing that girl can do is to marry someone else, and so release her cousin most effectually—if he still thinks himself bound by that preposterous engagement," I added, without raising my eyes from the enormous sunflower on which my fingers were occupied.

"Undoubtedly," rejoined Mrs. Vane. "But all the same she ought to have a glimpse of the old love before she

is on with the new. If I were a girl, engaged to Maurice Beresford, I would certainly think *twice* before giving him up. But, of course, you and I look on the matter from a different point of view. I have seen him, and you have *not*."

## CHAPTER XXI.

### CAPTAIN BERESFORD'S LETTER.

On ne donne rien si libéralement que ses conseils.  
*La Rochefoucauld.*

"NORA, where are you, Noah?" said Mrs. Vane, suddenly coming into the front veranda, where I was almost breathlessly intent on picking up some stitches in auntie's knitting. "Oh, here you are! The shawl has come, and I've just had a letter from Captain Beresford."

"Bother Captain Beresford!" I exclaimed, with a sudden start, dropping about eight stitches.

"Bother Captain Beresford!" in a high key of expostulation. "Come, come, you don't know what you are talking about. Did the dear girl get out of bed this morning wrong foot foremost? I thought she seemed a little short at breakfast-time!"

"You've made me drop a lot of stitches, bursting out on me like that," I answered crossly, and bending down very closely over my knitting to hide my rosy cheeks. Oh, treacherous, horrible blushes, why do you always come when you are not wanted? and why does my face become crimson at the mention of my cousin's name?

"Nonsense, you don't mean to tell me that you are so easily startled, you who have nerves of iron?" said Mrs. Vane, casting herself into a neighbouring chair. "The chudder is a very nice fine one. Just what your auntie wants, and only fifty rupees. Here, I'll read you what he says," unfolding a letter with a little complacent cough:

"DEAR MRS. VANE,

"For the last week my veranda has been the haunt of all the hawkers in the place, and littered with every kind of merchandise from beetle-worked ball-dresses, to blacking and knife-polish! Nothing will convince my

acquaintances that I am not on the verge of matrimony, and consigning bales of Cashmere goods to the adored one. The outcome of all *this* is your shawl, which I hope is all it ought to be. We are going on here as usual; dances, sky-races, and theatricals are of everyday occurrence. You ask about the fancy ball, and which were the most striking characters? Old Mrs. Goldsack, as a very obese and sallow 'Mary Queen of Scots,' was in my opinion the most startling impersonation in the room. I may be wrong in my recollection of the ill-fated Mary, it is years since I have opened a history. She *may* have weighed eighteen stone, she may have been partial to feathers, beads, and artificial flowers, and she may have worn green kid gloves, chastely garnished with swansdown. The eldest Miss Goldsack was clad in a very light and airy fabric, and went, it has been darkly hinted, as 'Venus.' However, no one had the courage to make enquiries and verify the fact. You ask specially about our costumes. Mr. Burke, 'cavalier, time Charles II.,' was magnificent in velvet, satin, and point lace; but he spent a miserably anxious evening, owing to the insecurity of his wig and moustache, and the loss of one of the high heels of his shoes; he was unable to move, and compelled to sit in a corner, where he was the unhappy prey of a gay, marauding *vivandière*. He is (as usual) sunning himself in the smiles of beauty, and butterflying from flower to flower. Mr. Tomkins, R.H.A., 'a fool, and looked the character,' to quote verbatim from our local thunderer. This was rough on poor Tommy, who really went as a French clown; he is crushed, his sensibilities are wounded, and he has withdrawn from public life.

"When I tell you that *I* appeared as a 'Black Brunswicker,' I leave your imagination to do the rest. I will not say that I looked like a picture—I will not say *anything*, being, as you have not failed to discover, by far the most modest person of your acquaintance.

"I have taken to photography and think I am most successful, and shall soon outrival 'Shepherd and Bourne;' but my friends are by no means so sanguine, and declare that their likenesses are the vilest and most diabolical libels! The fact is, they are too *true to nature*. I have immortalised all my stable—Picnic and Pinafore are simply perfect; and

I have taken all the servants—syces, grass-cutters, and every man Jack on the premises. Some day, I shall try my 'prentice hand on *you*. The General has been down here knocking us about—parades, inspections, field-days; and there is a rumour that our battery is to be moved (you can picture the agony of our friends), but where we are going to, or when, is as usual a secret, that nothing short of hot pincers would wring from the Quartermaster General. Green has come out with a wife, reported to be an old love—and certainly answers to the name, as she is fearfully ancient for a bride. The Colonel has treated me shamefully. I can hardly trust myself to write about him. I sent him no less than three long letters, and he has never vouchsafed *one* line. The fact is, that now he is at home he has drawn a sponge across the tablets of his memory, and endeavours to forget his Indian friends. However, I won't be forgotten. He is coming out in November, is he not? Nemesis awaits him. I have lodged my complaint, and I cannot do better than leave him to *you*. And now, good bye! You will be tired of all this nonsense, and I have written myself to a standstill.

“With kind regards, yours sincerely,

“MAURICE BERESFORD.”

“George is a shocking correspondent,” said Mrs. Vane, slowly folding up the missive. “Now, Nora, what do you think of him, from his letter?”

“Think of Colonel Vane?”

“No, you aggravating monkey; of Captain Beresford?”

“Judging from his effusion, I would say that he was satirical, conceited, and impudent.”

“Oh, my!” with arched brows. “Well, I can positively affirm that you are entirely wrong. He has not a scrap of conceit in his whole composition. Impudence and he are not to be named in the same week.”

“I am glad to hear it,” I returned coolly; “not that it is likely to affect me,” I said, balancing my pretty little high-heeled shoe on the extreme tip of my toe, and regarding it complacently.

“I wish to goodness you had never seen Major Percival,” said Mrs. Vane, with extraordinary irrelevance, rising and



parading the veranda with her hands clasped loosely behind her. "You and Maurice would get on like a house on fire."

"*Should* we?" I exclaimed with a smile of ironical interrogation.

"Yes, you would. You would suit each other down to the ground; you would make an ideal couple; and only for this other man being in the way, nothing would give me more real pleasure than to see you engaged to Maurice Beresford."

"Then, my dear lady, I am afraid you must moderate your wishes, and think of something else that will give you great pleasure," I answered cheerfully.

"Well, I only ask of you one thing, Noah," said Mrs. Vane, pausing with tragic emphasis, and pointing towards me with a warning forefinger; "if Maurice Beresford ever comes here——"

"He never will," I interrupted hastily.

"Likely enough—but if he *does*, promise me that you won't flirt with him."

"Flirt! *I!*" I echoed in a high key of virtuous repudiation. "I never flirt!"

"I know you *say* you don't, and I believe you really mean what you say, and you are every bit as pleasant to one of our own sex as you are to the lords of creation. *But*—you know you are pretty—very pretty——"

"Can I help that?" I inquired with lifted brows, making no effort to combat the assertion.

"And very bright and animated; and when you talk and laugh, and your colour comes and goes, and your eyes dance, and your lashes curl up, you look so bewitching, and so bent on being agreeable, that you are an uncommonly good imitation of—a flirt!" coolly pondering over my appearance.

"A flirt! I loathe the name! Doctor Johnson calls her 'a pert hussy.' Do you mean to insinuate that I look like *that*? Now come!" folding my arms akimbo, and giving a defiant toss of my front locks, whilst a smile I cannot for the life of me strangle, steals round my lips.

"Well—you are pert enough, at any rate—there is no denying *that*," with much decision, turning away.

"I know what you mean, Vi. I like to be pleasant to everybody. I am vain enough to delight in being a

favourite, even with animals! Can you imagine such rapacity for popularity? Putting men and women aside, I like to know that I am highly esteemed by the dogs, and twice as much respected as auntie, by the ponies Brandy and Soda."

"You little ridiculous goose."

"I know you are afraid that I shall wile your friend into the gentle mazes of a flirtation—as if I *ever* did such a thing—that I may beguile him into liking me, not 'wisely, but too well!' but fear not, oh, anxious matron! make your mind quite easy, my modest little Violet. I promise you that I shall *not* make myself agreeable to Captain Beresford, and I will even go *further* and say, that we shall detest each other most cordially."

"Oh, come, come—no one could detest *you*, Noah."

"Could they not?" I answered with a superior smile, as my thoughts flew back to Maurice and old days at Gallow.

"The reason I ask you not to exercise your fascinations is simply this——"

"You have a preposterously high opinion of my fascinations and my charms," I interrupt with hasty deprecation. "I wish you could have seen me four or five years ago," I added impressively.

"I see you as you are, and you are just the sort of girl to take Maurice's fancy."

I laugh grimly.

"He has such a high opinion of women——"

"Poor fellow! he has never met a Mrs. St. Ubes," I interrupt.

"Be *quiet* now, and let me speak. He has never been in love I'm sure, and if he were to lose his heart to you, you being already engaged, it would be worse for him than another, far worse!"

"No fear of that," I return emphatically, making a grimace at Turk, who was sitting on the steps gazing at me sentimentally, with his head on one side. "Do you not think his ears must be burning? Suppose we talk of someone else? Listen to Chinasawmy singing as he cleans the silver; did you ever, ever, *ever* hear such a tune? Darling Vi, suppose you run round and thank him, and tell him that we will not trespass on him any further."

"No!" (laughing). "Let him sing, poor doggie, if it amuses him. By-the-way, did I tell you that Mrs. Gower was at the Warrens' last night, and sat next me after dinner?"

"Dealing death and destruction to every reputation in the place, I suppose."

"No, no; for once you wrong her; in point of fact she was altogether taken up with you, my little dear."

"With me? What did she say? Tell me this instant. I am devoured with curiosity."

"Well, she delivered her soul very freely. She says she would not be your aunt, or mother, for a million."

"How sweet of her!"

"Pretty girls are so conspicuous, and such an anxiety! She hears that a certain Major Percival paid you tremendous attention at Ooty, and made you the talk of the hills, and then departed, merely leaving you a flattering likeness of himself, and his P.P.C. card."

"Vio, you are making this up. You are inventing."

"I am *not*, I declare to you. She thinks your aunt greatly to blame, as this kind of thing does girls so much harm, and keeps off real *bonâ fide* admirers—old Mr. Poate, the rich coffee merchant."

"Old Mr. Poate," I echoed contemptuously. "Hideous old creature! A widower, and never sober. The sight of him makes me feel positively ill. Is there anyone else she can suggest? What more did she say?"

"Oh, she did not say much. She said that it was really quite time you began to be looking about you, and I assured her that you would be very grateful for her kind advice and interest; but that, like the old woman in the shoe, you really had so many admirers you did not know what to do! and that you had half-a-dozen letters of proposal framed in your room!"

"She will believe you, she really *will*. I declare that was too bad of you; really too bad," I exclaimed angrily.

"I'm bad enough in all conscience," returned Mrs. Vane yawning; "I wish I were better—I wish I were a little Puritan like you, reading the Bible and saying your prayers, and attending to the services of holy church with rapt devotion. I wish I were a good woman, like your aunt, but it's not *in* me; all my most frivolous ideas come into

my head at prayers or in church, and I never can nail my attention to the sermon ; on the contrary, all the time the parson is preaching, I am composing the most lovely balladresses, which I pull to pieces again the moment I come out of church."

"What on earth have you two been gabbling about this morning?" said uncle, suddenly coming out of his study, pen in hand. "You are making as much noise as a couple of hungry jackdaws ; what was it all about—what was the topic you were discussing, eh?"

"Flirting for one thing," I answered, skipping down the veranda and enfolding him in my embrace.

"Flirting, indeed," holding me at arm's length, and pointing at me with an admonitory pen. "Well, as long as it is only talk on your part, and you never put the word into practice, I don't mind."

"No, indeed, I should hope *not*. If all tales be true"—laying my cheek against his—"you were a very bad young man, a young man who loved and rode away over and over again ! and you need not deny it"—seeing that he is about to expostulate—"Colonel Keith has been a traitor."

## CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTAIN BERESFORD HIMSELF.

We met, 'twas in a crowd.

IN whatever other channels their affections ran, there was certainly no love lost between Mrs. St. Ubes and Mrs. Vane. "Two of a trade never agree," and, notwithstanding the legend of the two Kings of Brentford, two queens in Mulkapore disputed, inch by inch, the right to wear the crown and wield the sceptre.

Mrs. St. Ubes had the advantage of being a resident of long standing, who knew her ground well. She had been a noted leader of society for more seasons than she cared to count. She detested women (and made no secret of the fact), and always selected her friends entirely from the opposite sex; with the exception of one lady, a Miss Hudson—who, flattered by this signal mark of condescension, readily became her confidante, or according to the gossips of Mulkapore, her jackal. *La belle lionne* was past her *première jeunesse*; I am not wronging her in any way when I say that she was fully five-and-thirty. She had been lovely, and was still remarkably good-looking. She had a pretty, piquant face, shaded by a thick, curly black fringe, and very darkly pencilled arched eyebrows gave a somewhat surprised and slightly supercilious expression to her magnificent brown eyes. Her figure was perfect; and she was naturally aware of the fact, and displayed it to the best advantage in the most tastefully-chosen costumes, if anything, a thought too *tight*.

Mrs. St. Ubes excelled in dancing, tennis, and riding, and also in a certain kind of smart repartee that evoked explosions of laughter from her immediate adherents. Each new-comer (of the fair sex) was critically inspected, and

mercilessly ridiculed by this, the sovereign lady of Mulkapore. She had a rooted objection to a pretty face, and looked on every new arrival as a possible competitor for the social throne. Hitherto, she had been undisputed mistress of the field, when lo! an unknown free lance, in the shape of Mrs. Vane, suddenly appeared, and boldly challenged the reigning queen. Mrs. Vane had the advantage of youth on her side; she was very pretty too, an excellent tennis-player, a renowned dancer, and was in her own way a consummate mistress of the art of *persiflage*. Consequently, it will be seen that she was prepared to fight Mrs. St. Ubes on her own ground, and with her own weapons. She won the prize at the tennis-tournament (a handsome gold bangle), carried it off after a desperate struggle with Mrs. St. Ubes, who for some time previously had mentally looked upon the bauble as her own. She annexed more than one of that lady's favourite partners at balls and small dances, and enraged her almost beyond endurance by receiving her most stinging remarks and cutting little speeches with a smiling affability of demeanour, that completely baffled her adversary. Ladies, one and all, favoured Mrs. Vane, and would have been sincerely gratified to see Mrs. St. Ubes extinguished and put down. Mrs. Vane never ignored her own sex; she was always pleasant and friendly; and, sought after as she was in society, I have seen her sit half an evening talking to an old dowager whose daughter she had known up the country; or walk for an hour at the band with a stupid uninteresting girl whose sister had been her schoolfellow. She never said spiteful things of people, nor mimicked or caricatured their failings for the amusement of her friends. Consequently she was far more popular than Mrs. St. Ubes. Moreover, she was the most generous and good-natured of human beings: her dresses were constantly "out," being copied by other people's dirzees; her songs made the round of Mulkapore; her nimble fingers trimmed hats and bonnets, and made up bouquets for all our immediate female circle. "If all trades fail, I will be a milliner," she would say, holding up her latest achievement complacently; and indeed she had almost the knack and taste of a first-class professional.

About six weeks after Mrs. Vane's arrival, invitations to a very, very grand ball at the Residency stirred the

souls of the dancing portion of Mulkapore to their inmost depths. There were to be tents, coloured lanterns, and fireworks in the grounds; in fact, every inducement for prolonged promenading. A large portion of the native nobility were to be present, in order to see the Europeans' *maut*; and nothing was to be wanting to make it the grandest ball that Mulkapore had ever witnessed. The eventful evening came, our most glowing anticipations were fulfilled, if not surpassed. The floor was perfect; the enormous durbar-room just nicely crowded. The programme included the newest and prettiest dance music; and every one, looking their brightest and best, seemed to be bent on enjoying themselves thoroughly. The third dance was already over, and I and my partner were slowly making our way through the crowd in the large white-pillared portico, when, in the very densest block, I was suddenly accosted by Mrs. Vane, breathless and excited. As she passed she whispered to me with evident exultation, and much *empressement*, "K 50 has come! arrived this morning;" the next moment she had been carried away by the crowd, and I was left to find a key to her remark as best I could. "K 50!" What in the world did she mean? After a few seconds' consideration, I "gave it up;" in fact, I completely forgot the circumstance in conning over a much-involved programme. Five minutes later I took my place in one of the numerous sets of Lancers that were forming up and down the room. Ours was a sixteen set, and as we took up our position, I glanced casually from couple to couple. There was Mrs. St. Ubes, looking remarkably well, in a low black net dress, trimmed with quantities of gold, and whispering (goodness knows what) to her partner behind her enormous black fan. There was Lizzie Hudson in that horrible green again. Exactly opposite stood Mrs. Vane, looking unusually pretty and animated: nothing suited her as well as pink, and her partner was a good-looking gunner. A second glance—I shut my eyes and opened them again—no, they had *not* deceived me! I was face to face with my kinsman, cousin, and former *fiancé*—*Maurice Beresford*!

Before I had time to collect my scattered wits, it was our turn to advance. He was coming towards me; prompt flight had been my first insane impulse, but common

sense held me fast. As we touched each other's fingers, and made the usual small gyration, I stole a glance at him once more. There was no recognition in his face, as his eyes met mine, yet during the whole five figures I was aware that they strayed very often in my direction. My wits seemed to be preternaturally sharpened, and I know that he was asking Mrs. Vane who I was, and all about me. I wonder what my partner thought of me? Probably, that I was some poor half-witted creature; I answered—when I replied at all—completely at random; and the bad shots I made were to be gathered from the expression of puzzled amazement reflected in my companion's face. Although I dared not be all eyes, I was an embodiment of too intensely listening ears—my ears actually ached with trying to catch what our *vis à-vis* were talking about, and if in the “tall young lady in white” Maurice had discovered his runaway cousin Nora O'Neill!

No sooner was the dance over, than with a hasty excuse, I relinquished my partner's arm and made my way to the ladies' dressing-room. At first it was crowded with various other dancers who had put in for repairs. I ensconced myself in a remote armchair, feeling, without any affectation, quite nervous and almost stunned by the sudden shock of meeting Maurice, till the soft strains of the “Dolores” waltz completely emptied the apartment of all. There was one exception; Mrs. St. Ubes lingered behind, ostensibly to have a stitch put in the rosette of her shoe, but in reality to repair some little flaws in her complexion. Thinking herself alone, she hurried to the toilet-table, removed and tightened her fringe (which was false), powdered her face over most carefully, and then leisurely surveyed the back of her head, and her profile, by means of a hand-glass. The result of the inspection was evidently satisfactory; and, giving her skirts a final twitch, she was turning to leave the room, with a complacent smile on her lips. In turning, for the first time, she perceived *me*, reclining in a deep armchair, the critical spectator of her recent operations, and the smile suddenly froze into an expression of disgusted amazement.

“You here, Miss Neville? What on earth are you doing? Why are you not dancing?” she asked sharply.



"I felt a little giddy," I returned, standing up, "and thought I would sit quiet for a few minutes."

"Giddy?" she echoed, with an incredulous sneer, looking into my face with a scrutiny that was downright rude. "You! Such an untiring waltzer, to talk of being *giddy*! You have not been quarrelling with anyone, have you, or setting your partners at loggerheads?" she asked, with an air of amiable interest.

"Oh dear no?" I answered energetically.

"By the way," arranging her bracelets, "I suppose you have *carte blanche* from Major Percival about dancing? Some men are *so* exacting in that way; they won't allow their *fiancées* to dance round dances."

"Major Percival is not so selfish," I replied warmly.

"Oh," with a little significant sniff, "he is just like his neighbours, no better and no worse. He is a charming friend," emphatically, "but I don't think he will make a good husband."

"Don't you? and why not?" I asked, holding my head very high, and speaking in an icy tone.

"Because, my dear girl, he is so fickle, so uncertain; never knows his own mind for four consecutive weeks. Take my advice, and you will be wise. Don't let him stay six months in England; and whatever you do, *don't have a long engagement*," rapping my arm impressively with her fan at each of the five last words.

"It is very kind of you to take such an interest in me, Mrs. St. Ubes," endeavouring to steady my voice, which was trembling; "but I intend to be Miss Neville for a long time yet. I am——"

"Then you will never be Mrs. Percival," she interrupted with almost triumphant emphasis. "Ah, *I* could tell you something that would open your eyes," with unspeakable significance. "By the way, I see you are admiring my necklet."

I was *not*. I was almost too angry to speak, or to see.

"Is it not lovely?" standing right before me, and holding up a splendid locket encrusted with brilliants. "*Ille* gave it to me as a 'Philippina' last year. Oh, long before he ever saw you; so you need not look so jealous!"

"I am not feeling jealous, Mrs. St. Ubes; so my looks must be deceitful. And if you will kindly allow me to

pass, I am going to ask for a glass of water," moving away.

"Oh—certainly. I hope your giddiness will soon go off," she returned, nodding to me carelessly; and without another word she turned and sailed out of the room.

Probably on the principle of counter-irritation, my interview with Mrs. St. Ubes roused me from the state of mental "coma" into which I had fallen on so suddenly beholding my cousin. I drank some iced water, bathed my forehead with eau-de-Cologne, and felt better. My heart still beat very fast; but I was now, comparatively speaking, composed, as I walked over to the cheval-glass, and took a good long impartial look at myself.

The mirror introduced me to a tall, slight, graceful girl, with quantities of wavy, bronze-coloured hair growing low on her forehead, and fastened up in a knot at the back. She had large dark eyes (hue indistinct by candle-light); very long lashes, which turned upwards at the tips; a pretty, curved mouth, evidently well used to laughter and smiles; and a creamy, fair complexion. This good-looking young person was dressed in a white silk ball-toilet, artistically arranged with clouds of tulle and bunches of silvered narcissus; the low body was finished off with a berthe of the same flowers, and one or two nestled among her dark auburn tresses. What possible resemblance could anyone see between her and that vision of ugliness, Nora O'Neill? Nora, with her skimpy, short skirts, her hair dragged off her face, and confined in a pig-tail, her complexion the rendezvous of sun and freckles! "He *could* not know me!" I said to myself with decision, as I straightened my necklet, and pulled up my long gloves; "I'll go back to the ball-room and brave it out! No one would recognise Nora O'Neill in Miss Neville;" and, with another long, critical stare, I gathered up my fan and bouquet, and swept out of the room.

I was instantly seized upon by my partner, anxious to make the most of the last bars of the "Dolores." During the next three or four dances neither Mrs. Vane nor Maurice appeared in the ball-room, and I was beginning to breathe a little more freely, when a well-known treble at my side exclaimed:

"Oh, here you are! I've been looking for you every-

where. Captain Beresford wishes to be introduced to you. Captain Beresford, Miss Neville."

Maurice bowed gravely, and so did I. But I was on the eve, all the same, of one of my wildest and most foolish explosions of laughter. To be introduced in this formal way to Maurice—Maurice, whose pockets I had sewn up, whose pillow I had assiduously floured, was almost asking too much from my gravity.

"You will *never* guess the reason Captain Beresford assigned for an immediate introduction," said Mrs. Vane, tapping me playfully with her fan. "He declares that you are the very *image* of his grandmother! Did you ever hear of anything so absurd!"

Maurice was getting "hot," as they say in Magic Music, and a foolish grin was my only comment. If I was really like the picture of Molly Beresford that hung in the library at Gallow, *here* was a compliment, and no mistake! She had been a celebrated beauty, and the toast of three counties.

"It is really too bad of Mrs. Vane," exclaimed Maurice, now addressing *me*, "to divulge what I had imparted to her in the strictest confidence. No lady can ever keep a secret—such at least is my experience," he added with a smile.

"Can they not?" I asked incredulously. "I am quite sure that *I* could keep one if I tried."

"You have never yet had a secret to keep, you foolish child," exclaimed Mrs. Vane, "and if you had, it would be public property in twenty-four hours!"

I had no time to stay and bandy words with her, as my partner was all eagerness, like the whiting in "Wonderland," "to join the dance." Ere I moved away, Maurice said: "I suppose I can scarcely hope for the pleasure of a dance?" In reply I merely shook my head and exhibited a crowded and much-defaced programme; and here, seeing that my cavalier was rapidly losing all patience, I took his arm and resumed our interrupted waltz. But I had by no means seen the last of Maurice, nor heard the last of him that evening. Each of my partners who belonged to his arm of the Service plied me with the same questions: "Had I seen Captain Beresford? Was he not good-looking? The best dancer in the room? Had I remarked his step? A

capital cricketer, and one of the best riders in the Service ; " and so on with a long string of his perfections. At length I lost all patience, and when a third enthusiastic friend commenced the same story, sharply told him that I had heard of nothing but Captain Beresford all the evening, and that a fresh topic of conversation would be an agreeable variety.

The evening was waning. The cotillion was in full swing. The looking-glass, umbrella, cushion, and flag figures had been each in turn disposed of. Now it was a sheet that was brought forward as an incentive to dancing. A sheet held up across the room, over which all would-be dancers held one finger above the top, and one only. The ladies advance and tempt fate ; each selecting a finger and seizing it. The sheet drops, and away goes everybody in couples.

Nellie Fox and I approached the sheet, and tempted fate together.

" That's a well-fitting glove, Nellie," I remarked, pointing to a neat forefinger somewhat apart from the others. " I'm sure the owner must be a good dancer ; " so saying, I at once appropriated the digit, standing on tiptoe and clutching it in my hand. The sheet dropped, and I found myself tightly clasping Maurice Beresford. There was nothing for it, but *de l'audace, de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace*, and in another second we were revolving among the dancers.

" This is indeed a most unlooked-for piece of good-fortune," he said, as we paused for breath. After one or two commonplace observations, he added : " This is a stupid figure that they are getting up now. You must be tired, as you have been dancing incessantly all the evening. Will you come up to the supper-room, and have some refreshment ? The soup is strongly to be recommended."

I *was* very tired, and I made no resistance. It was my fate that I was to meet Maurice, to speak to him, to dance with him, to go to supper with him ! There was no use struggling with *kismet*. I acquiesced, and in another two minutes we had gained the supper-room.

A good many people were still there : survivors from the supper-hour ; men who did not dance ; girls who were in hiding from obnoxious partners (with the favoured cavalier

of the evening); people who had come up for a late supper, like ourselves; and various isolated hardened flirts, pulling crackers and sipping champagne. Maurice, having secured a seat for me, hastened away to summon an attendant to bring soup and clean plates.

I watched him furtively, as he waylaid a fat Madrassee butler, and convoyed him towards our end of the table. He was, as Mrs. Vane had said, strikingly handsome, and his tall, well-knit figure was set off to the greatest advantage by the most becoming uniform in the service—the Horse Artillery jacket. Whether he was a ladies' man or not, he was certainly accustomed to wait on them. Everything I required came to my hand as if by magic, and he organised a most charming *petit souper* from the *débris* of the banquet. Over against us sat Mrs. Gower, relating with infinite gusto some astounding anecdote. Her listener, a bored, *blasé*-looking man, gave her his ears; to us he was good enough to devote his eyes. Evidently he found us an interesting spectacle. Drawing his companion's attention to us, she lost no time in obliging him—I could see by her gestures and glances—with a full if not true description of my family history, age, accomplishments, and prospects.

Maurice and I conversed together very pleasantly. We discussed the ball, the *menu*, and the guests; and, our repast concluded, we descended once more to the field of action. My cavalier was not forthcoming, and I yielded to Maurice's entreaties for this one waltz. He danced divinely, so smoothly, and so easily, that it was a treat to be his partner, my lawful, but tardy proprietor meanwhile glowering from a doorway.

After prolonging our waltz to the very last bar, we made our way out into the lofty portico, and thence along a wide crimson-carpeted veranda, lined with large shrubs and plants, among the shadows of which seats for *two* had been most cunningly introduced. Maurice, I could see, was no novice in the art of discovering a conveniently situated *solitude à deux*, and soon we were sharing a very comfortable settee. From our retreat we looked out on passing couples and the lamp-lit grounds with a sense of luxurious retirement. More than once I found my companion studying my face with a look of the gravest and most puzzled interest. On the second of these occasions, as our eyes met,

he looked somewhat confused, and observed, half apologetically: "I *never* saw such an extraordinary resemblance in all my life. You are as like an old family portrait at home as if you had stepped out of the frame!"

"Do you mean your grandmother?" I asked, discreetly concealing a lurking smile with the top of my fan.

"I do," he answered with deep conviction.

"I'm not quite sure that to be told that you resemble a person's grandmother is exactly my *beau idéal* of a graceful compliment."

"Paying compliments is not at all in my line," replied Maurice emphatically. "Do you imagine that your double is a middle-aged frump with a short waist, sausage curls, and a mob cap? Because if you do, you are much mistaken. She is—never mind, I won't say what she is"—pulling himself up—"it would not make you any wiser. But if you were to see the picture I know you would not be displeased to hear that you resembled her."

I *had* seen the picture, and was not at all displeased.

"Have you been long in India, Miss Neville?" was a question that startled me out of some very complacent reflections.

"Ever since I have been grown up," was my evasive answer.

"Well, that can only have been a very recent achievement," was my cousin's polite reply.

"You are Irish, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes. Does not the brogue speak for me?"

"No, indeed," indignantly. "May I ask what part of Ireland you come from?"

"The South," I replied laconically.

"The South is a large place," he said with a smile.

"It is," I answered shortly. "Don't you think that you have asked enough questions for one evening, Captain Beresford?" I put in quickly; "or would you like to know my age and height?"

"I am sure I beg your pardon. I am afraid you will think me very inquisitive, but I come from the South of Ireland too, and as most people in that part of the world are connected in *some* way, I was thinking that perhaps, for all we knew, you and I might be twentieth cousins once removed. Are you quite certain that you have no relations

of the name of Beresford?" he asked, looking at me earnestly with his dauntless grey eyes.

This was too much even for my equanimity, which, considering everything, had been most remarkable. I had been playing with fire hitherto, and rather liked the sensation than otherwise. Dropping my fan and instantly diving for it in order to conceal my tell-tale cheeks, I replied, as I stood up, "I am engaged for this dance, Captain Beresford, and have no leisure for tracing out my genealogy just at present." I said this with all the stiffness and dignity I could assume, and, carrying my head very high, stepped out of our mutual seclusion into the wide, well-lit, crowded veranda.

Maurice looked more surprised than abashed at my sudden change of demeanour, and contented himself with carrying my bouquet, and critically examining it, as we strolled back towards the ball-room.

"May I ask you *one* more question, Miss Neville?" he inquired, with an air of the most humble deference.

My heart literally stood still with fear, and my knees trembled beneath me. *What* was he going to say? Had he a glimmering of the truth? I felt cold all over, as, unable to frame a syllable, I bowed my head.

"Are you any relation to Colonel Neville, the great sportsman?"

What a relief!

"Yes, I am his niece," I replied civilly.

"Indeed! I have a letter of introduction to him from an old friend of his; I shall call and present it to-morrow in person. Will you introduce me to your mother?" observing auntie, who was benched among the chaperons, rise and make a gesture of delight and relief as I approached. She beamed on my partner for having restored to her her little stray sheep.

"Auntie," I said, "Captain Beresford wishes to be introduced to you!—Mrs. Neville, Captain Beresford." The beaming smile instantly disappeared from her countenance, and she accorded Maurice a most frigid salutation. There was yet another dance, and a most pertinacious dancing maniac would listen to no excuse, and led me off protesting and entreating, whilst Maurice and auntie remained *tête-à-tête*. However he contrived it I know not, but by the time

I returned to my weary relative, her face was once more wreathed in smiles, and Maurice was sitting beside her, laughing and talking, and evidently winning golden opinions from the dear old lady.

We held a council of war that night in auntie's dressing-room. We agreed to let the missing cousin remain at large.

"After a little we will tell him, perhaps," concluded auntie. "If he is really as nice as he seems on first acquaintance, we will confide in him by-and-by. And I have no doubt that you and he will be excellent friends, more especially when he hears that you are engaged to be married!" So saying, and yawning most extravagantly, auntie kissed me affectionately, and dismissed me to bed.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### AFTER THE BALL.

La confiance fournit plus à la conversation que l'esprit.

THE morning after the ball, it needs not to say that we made a late breakfast. Mrs. Vane and I repaired to the drawing-room afterwards, where we settled ourselves comfortably, she on a sofa, and I in an easy chair; and there we passed the forenoon reading, and yawning, and discussing the evening's entertainment.

"Don't you feel like a *worm* to-day?" exclaimed Mrs. Vane, tossing up a cushion, and rearranging it carefully under her head.

"Not quite so bad as all that," I returned, laughing.

"Nonsense, my good girl; you have been yawning like an alligator all morning!"

"I *am* rather sleepy," I admitted, concealing another fearful yawn with "The Lays of Ind," which had been lying in my lap.

"I hope you saw the globe trotter last evening?" resumed Mrs. Vane, turning so as to survey me comfortably, with her hand under her head.

"Saw him!" I echoed. "Why, where were your eyes? I not only saw him, but danced with him."

"Impossible! And you live to tell the tale! If I had seen you, I should certainly have interfered on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. What on earth induced you to take the floor with him? He dances like an elephant on hot irons, and bangs his partner about as if she were a rag doll."

"I very nearly became a *real* rag doll," I rejoined. "I only took one turn with him, and the marvel to me is that we did not kill a few people as we went plunging down the room, regardless of any consequences."

"Well, the burnt child dreads the fire. You won't dance with him again, I presume," observed Mrs. Vane emphatically.

"You need scarcely ask! But he's pleasant enough as long as I have not to dance with him. He is awfully nice to talk to; it is like hearing a book of travels read aloud. He is an American, you know. He says that I am like an American girl; evidently the highest compliment he could pay me."

"Never mind his compliments, but tell me, what did you think of Mrs. St. Ubes?" she proceeded.

"I thought she looked very handsome," I replied, revolving in my mind whether I would share my discovery touching her fringe, or not.

"She danced nearly every dance with her new retriever, that man like Mephistopheles."

"What harm, if they were both amused?" I returned, with tranquil liberality.

"What *harm*?" echoed Mrs. Vane irritably. "No actual harm, of course; but I consider that sort of thing such shocking bad style."

"Talking of style," I exclaimed, "what did you think of all the new dresses? Which did you admire the most?"

"My own and yours were decidedly among the prettiest frocks present," she answered complacently. "But," rising on her elbow with sudden animation, "my dear Noah, had you anything in the ark that surpassed Mrs. Cooper Smythe, and did you remark Mrs. Trowers in the blue and pink?"

"Yes, I saw her. The body of one dress and the skirt of another to all appearance."

"She reminded me of nothing so much as a dirty penny valentine," said my companion, with an elevation of her nose.

"By no means a bad idea," I returned, laughing; "and the two Misses Hudson, what did you think of them?"

"In those old green dresses, done up with yellow lilies. They nearly made me sick; if there is one thing I abominate more than another it is spinach and eggs."

"Well, you must allow that Nellie Fox looked well."

"Yes. I can easily bring myself to play the part of admirer to her, if you like, and Miss Roberts is certainly a pretty little girl."

"And Mrs. Bland looked very handsome, did she not?"

"So, so. Her face is well enough, but her figure! Such a waist is a calamity to any woman," replied Mrs. Vane, endeavouring to strangle a huge yawn. "I do hope we shall have no visitors to-day. It would be a good plan to tell the butler that 'missus can't see——'"

"I know of one visitor, at any rate," I observed, with an air of assumed indifference. "Captain Beresford is coming to call."

"*Déjà!*" ejaculated Mrs. Vane, rousing herself to a sitting posture, and looking at me with an air of amused significance, for which I could gladly have slapped her. "I saw you last night," she proceeded, "sitting in the corridor, behind those big ferns. The idea of your pretending that you never flirt, and only go to dances for dancing's sake. You won't take me in again with that nice little fable. No, no. Never no more, my old Noah!"

"But, *indeed*, you are altogether mistaken," I expostulated eagerly. "I was only there for a few minutes, resting after that long waltz; it was quite accidental my sitting down at all."

"There, there; that will do!" she interrupted. "*Qui s'excuse, s'accuse!* Don't trouble your little head hunting for excuses. Maurice Beresford is an amply good one for any girl. I need not ask you how you like him. Facts speak for themselves. You do like him, don't you?"

"I really could not give an opinion on such a short acquaintance," I answered, reaching for my knitting.

"Oh, come, that's all nonsense; if you had not liked him you would not have accompanied him into that nice little summer-house among the ferns. What a deep old Noah it is! But she shall keep nothing from me. It would be worse than useless to attempt to have any secrets from her affectionate friend, Violet Vane. Tell me, Noah, don't you think that the runaway cousin was a little rash. She could not have looked, or she never would have leaped. What is your opinion? She may go farther and fare worse, eh?"

"My opinion is," I answered, reddening in spite of myself, "that no girl worth her salt would consent to be thrust upon a man like a bale of goods—sold and bought

for family reasons. I also think that Captain Beresford's cousin comes between you and your rest!"

"Granted," replied Mrs. Vane imperturbably; "and now that she is out of the way, and the coast is clear, what would *you* think of stepping into her empty shoes? Your likeness to the family grandmother is in itself a strong recommendation!"

"Mrs. Vane!" I exclaimed angrily, "even in joke you should not say such things, you know very well that I am engaged."

"Yes—to a man you don't care two straws about, and who is double your age! My dear, you may look as indignant as you please; on some subjects I must speak my mind, or die in the effort!"

At this instant a dog-cart drove up, and two cards were brought up by our fat butler. Mrs. Vane seized them and read aloud, "'Captain Beresford, Royal Horse Artillery.' '*Parle du diable et on voit sa queue!*' Am I all right?" jumping up quickly and patting down her fringe with both hands. "Will I do?"

"Of course you will; it would be painting the lily to add a single touch to your appearance," I answered, dashing about the room and restoring books and chair-backs to their places.

"What!" very sharply, divining my intention. "You don't mean to say you want to run away, you mean critter? You shan't—you shall just stay and make yourself pleasant," seizing me in a vice-like grasp, and holding me back with might and main. There was no use in struggling with this very strong and exceedingly determined little person, nor was there time for any serious resistance.

"Have your way, Vi," I exclaimed petulantly, sinking into an easy-chair, "but never mind, young lady, I shall pay you out for *this*!"

## CHAPTER XXIV.

“LAIDE À FAIRE PEUR.”

For 'tis a truth well known to most  
That, whatsoever thing is lost,  
We seek it, ere it come to light  
In every cranny but the right.—*Courper.*

WHEN Maurice was ushered into the drawing-room he found no traces of a heated argument (much less of a recent scuffle) between the two models of ladylike industry and graceful composure, who were seated serenely apart.

“None the worse for last night, Mrs. Vane,” he said, when our greetings were concluded, bringing himself to an anchor in a deep wicker-chair.

“On the contrary; all the better,” she returned briskly. “Capital dance, was it not?”

“First class; I must say the Resident of Mulkapore knows how to give a good ball when he goes about it; the floor was perfect, and the supper and champagne beyond all praise.”

“How like a man, to mention eating and drinking before anything else! Pray, what did you think of our young ladies—whom did you admire? or did they all fail to please Captain Beresford’s fastidious taste?”

“Come now, Mrs. Vane, this won’t *do*; why are you down on me in this way? The fact is, I admired so many that it would be invidious to particularise one;” hastily glancing at me.

“What nonsense you talk! But seriously——”

“Seriously! I have not seen so many pretty faces in the same room for ages; I thought them so dazzling individually, and so overwhelming *en masse*, that my head has been swimming ever since. *Now* are you satisfied?” he asked with a smile.

‘Did you remark the girl in the curious rose-coloured

costume," pursued Mrs. Vane—"dark, with very bright eyes? I thought her lovely"—enthusiastically. "She is a stranger from Bombay, staying at the General's."

"The 'caprice in pink,' as little Burke called her? I had the honour of dancing with her, but we could not get round a bit; however, she was awfully nice to talk to."

"Ah! beware of talking to her overmuch; she is an engaged young lady," returned Mrs. Vane with a significant shake of the head. "And, *à propos* of engagements, is it really true that little Mr. Smith of the Pea Greens, is actually going to marry old Miss Hook?"

"Perfectly true," responded Maurice impressively.

"I declare," casting up eyes and hands, "when Colonel Falkner told me the news last evening you might have knocked me down with the traditional feather."

"I wonder how many people that feather has floored," said Maurice, with a speculative smile.

"He is a mere boy, and she is fifteen years older than him if she is a day," proceeded Mrs. Vane acrimoniously; "it is monstrous; it is unheard of! She ought to be indicted for child stealing."

"Well, she does not *look* more than eight-and-twenty, and, though not strictly speaking beautiful, she has certain very solid attractions. And, as Smith seems to find the arrangement in every respect satisfactory, I suppose we may as well give our consent—eh, Mrs. Vane?" replied Maurice, with easy cheerfulness. "Hullo, old fellow, where did you come from?"—to Turk, who for some time had been reconnoitring from the veranda, with stealthy distrustful sniffs, vainly endeavouring to recognise the stranger as an acquaintance, and now, his mind at length fully made up, trotted jauntily across the room, and bounded into Maurice's lap with an air of patronising confidence.

"You may consider yourself a highly honoured person, Captain Beresford. Turk is a most exclusive and discriminating dog; few and far between are the people he condescends to notice."

"Oh, all dogs take to me," said Maurice carelessly, pulling Turk's ears.

"They say dogs and children are the best judges of mankind," remarked Mrs. Vane; "and I am exceedingly

sorry to tell you that I am not popular with either. Most unaccountable, is it not?"

"Are there any small people here?"

"No. We have none that we can call exclusively our own; but we can bring you in any number from next door at a moment's notice—unique specimens; we can produce two of the most impudent, thrusting, ill-behaved imps in the whole presidency. You have only to say the word," stretching towards a hand-bell.

"Pray don't summon them on *my* account," returned Maurice with a laugh. "I know all about the ideal imp from painful practical experience."

He was thinking of us undoubtedly.

"So you passed the higher standard after all," said Mrs. Vane, striking out into a new channel of conversation.

"I just scraped through, after nearly reducing myself to permanent imbecility. Another examination would leave me a gibbering idiot, for I am an awful duffer at languages. I mean to read and write. I can talk pretty well, but the bookwork bowls me over."

"Oh, come," disbelievingly; "I thought you young men from Woolwich were clever enough for anything—just so many walking encyclopædias."

"You are thinking of the Engineers, Violet," I observed with engaging frankness, raising my eyes from my knitting for the first time to volunteer an observation.

"Miss Neville," said Maurice, looking hard at me, "wishes to remind you of the old tradition that all Artillery officers have been previously plucked for the Engineers, and that *they* are the swagger corps."

"I don't believe a word of it," exclaimed Violet energetically. "Why, look at the uniform; there's no comparison."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Vane," said Maurice with a broad smile. "You always stand up for us and take our part."

"Of course I do, George's brother-officers; and, by the way, has Major Miller brought that old bay horse of his all the way down here—the one he wanted to sell George for second charger?"

"He has. It is still in the market, and is getting to look more and more like a cow every day; the horns are a mere question of time."

"I thought Major Miller seemed rather low and out of spirits last evening; he had a blighted look, as if he had something on his mind."

"No doubt he had. He is going to be married, poor beggar. Ahem!" catching himself up, "that was a slip of the tongue. Of course you know I did not mean *that*."

"Oh, of course not," ironically. "I have observed a lightness and flippancy in the way you talk about matrimony that is simply unendurable, and must be put a stop to."

"Come now, Mrs. Vane, you never heard me say a word against matrimony, a most excellent institution which I respect exceedingly. I only object to a brother-officer's marriage for one reason—You will admit that it ruins the mess?" proudly putting forward an unanswerable argument.

"The mess!" contemptuously. "I wonder how many love-affairs have been killed and sacrificed to that Moloch—the mess."

"And pray what are you going to give Major Miller as a wedding gift?"

"My sympathy," returned Maurice without hesitation.

"A cheap present, which we will all return in kind when you yourself enter into the holy state."

"Thanks, awfully; but that is a step I do not intend to take for many a day, if ever. I mean to have a little play first."

"Play! I wish the anxious mothers heard you. Play to you, and death to them!"

"That is not what I mean, Mrs. Vane, and you know it perfectly well; only you are bent on representing me in a cruelly false light to Miss Neville. I allude to polo, cricket, racing, shooting-trips, whist-parties; all of which little innocent recreations will no doubt be knocked on the head by Mrs. B., if such a person ever exists——"

At this juncture my ball of knitting-silk rolled off my lap, and far away under a distant table. Maurice and I both simultaneously started up to seek it. He was the finder, and as I accepted it I subsided into an easy-chair still more remote from Mrs. Vane—almost, indeed, out of ear-shot—and isolating myself so completely as to leave them to enjoy an untrammelled *tête-à-tête*.



I observed that Maurice cast more than one speculative, interrogatory glance in my direction, as much as to say, "Can this be the girl who was so pleasant last night?" But the fact was I had not made up my mind as to the rôle I was to play—with regard to him. Would it not be wiser to confess the truth, and have no more concealments or disguise? But then, I was committed to secrecy, by my conduct of the previous evening. I had had a glorious opportunity of introducing myself, and, as usual, lacked the courage to turn it to good account. I must remain Miss Neville—an all but total stranger.

I leant back in my chair at a distance that made conversation almost out of the question, and gave all my eyes and ears and wits to a calm dispassionate study of my newly-found kinsman. He was more like himself this morning, than in his gold-laced jacket of last evening. Five years had not made as much alteration in his appearance as it had in mine. He looked older, of course; his hair was darker, his moustache heavier, his face bronzed by the sun—all but a little three-cornered patch where his forage-cap rested—but his eyes, his voice, and his laugh, all belonged to the Maurice of Gallow. Conversation now and then drifted to my ears as I took in all these details with lightning stealthy glances. Mrs. Vane was saying, with a smile and a nod:

"I know something about *you* that you little guess. I was told it as a wonderful secret."

"This is delightfully mysterious," returned Maurice impressively. "Something about *me*"—slowly—"and a great secret? I have it! You have been witness to a will, in which I am legatee to a fabulous sum."

"Nothing of the kind," she rejoined emphatically.

"You have been asked to sound me, and discover my wishes with regard to some handsome presentation."

"How can you be so silly?"

"Perhaps I am in the secret myself?" he asked, with lifted brows.

"Yes, you are; in fact, you are the mainspring of the whole affair."

"I declare you are making me quite nervous, Mrs. Vane. However, luckily for me, I have no indiscretions to conceal."

"Well, shall I give you a hint? It is something George told me."

"Something George told you!" he echoed in an accent of puzzled speculation; "not about the caricature we sent old Brown—come now?"

"No, no, no. How stupid you are!" contemptuously.

"Well, I give it up! I am, as you know, entirely above the meanness of curiosity; but I see you are dying to enlighten me, so say on!" with a nod of encouragement.

"It is," lowering her voice, "about a girl!" Certainly Mrs. Vane was most indiscreet, and certainly I began to feel very uncomfortable.

"A girl! I am just where I was before! I'm afraid you must give me another tip, for by the unassisted light of my own memory I cannot think of any young lady whose name deserves mention in such a deeply significant manner—a girl!" he concluded with a laugh.

"Yes, your runaway *fiancée*; your cousin——"

"Oh, by George," reddening visibly, and evidently no less amazed than annoyed; "I call that hard lines. So much for telling anything to a married man! He immediately unbosoms himself to his wife, and she takes all her dearest friends into her confidence!"

"You know that I am a model of discretion, and that your secret is safe with *me*," continued Mrs. Vane in her most conciliatory manner, flashing a look of guilty import in my direction—happily unseen by Maurice, who, cane in hand, was angrily sketching on the carpet, his eyes gloomily fixed on the floor.

"You have never had a clue?" continued his companion, with inconceivable rashness. Had she but known Maurice's storm-signals as well as I did!

"Never," he answered shortly, without looking up.

"Beyond Liverpool—you traced her to Liverpool, did you not? I wonder where on earth she can be?"

"I only wish I knew; I would give half I possess to find her," returned my cousin emphatically.

"By all accounts, she was a good riddance," continued Mrs. Vane consolingly; "altogether a most undesirable young person, and *laide à faire peur*."

"Really, this quite reminds me of a game of Russian scandal," said Maurice with a laugh. I add a few details,

and describe her to Miss Neville"—looking over at me—"she describes her to somebody else; in time my unfortunate—a—cousin will be a blind and humpbacked idiot!"

"But you certainly said that she was *plain*," persisted Mrs. Vane, by no means too well pleased with her friend's sarcasms.

"I never said that she was a good riddance, and *laide à faire peur*."

Now, now, Maurice! have you not often called me "an ugly little toad?"

"Have you no earthly idea as to what has become of her?" continued Mrs. Vane, for whom the subject possessed a peculiar fascination.

"No, not the faintest," he answered, in a cool, reserved voice, as though he would check an unwelcome topic; and Mrs. Vane, taking the hint, turned the conversation into a less personal channel,

"*Laide à faire peur*, indeed!" I said to myself. I glanced across at an opposite mirror, and what did I see? I saw a slight figure in a well-made, soft, creamy, washing silk, with a gauged body and many little flounces; a pretty face, surrounded by masses of wavy chestnut hair; a pair of little white hands, holding a half-knitted red silk sock. In the glass, I beheld another and more distant reflection—Maurice—Maurice gazing at me with intent critical scrutiny; scrutiny which was, to say the least of it, embarrassing. He looked as if he were anxiously endeavouring to evolve some dim memory from the remote recesses of his brain. I would remain no longer. Who could tell what discovery he might make?

Gathering up my work with an indistinct excuse, I bowed a distant bow, and hastily departed. I avoided Maurice on every possible occasion, so much so, that one evening, as we were driving home from the band, Mrs. Vane took it upon herself to read me a little lecture.

"My dear girl," she said, "there *is* a medium between being positively rude and too bewitchingly fascinating. Why do you taboo Captain Beresford so, and wholly cut him off from the sweets of your society? Strange to say, he politely ignores your appalling behaviour, and manifests the deepest interest in you and yours. He asked me if you had any sisters—how old you were——"

“How excessively impertinent!” I interrupted brusquely. “I thought he boasted that he was above the meanness of curiosity!”

“That only applies to ordinary cases. You must remember the singular attraction you have for him, in your strong resemblance to his lamented grandmother!” returned Mrs. Vane, choking with laughter. “Do accept a little advice from me, Nora,” she continued eagerly; “for the mere sake of appearances, don’t turn your back on a gentleman, nor answer over his head if he addresses you, nor fly out of a room when he arrives. Of course,” ironically, “we all know that he is the very opposite to your friend Major Percival; but that, you will be liberal enough to admit, is his misfortune, not his *fault*. Do endeavour to tolerate our constant guest, Captain Beresford—at least try to meet him halfway.”

“But, my dear lady,” I protested impatiently, “I don’t want to meet him at *all*!” wrapping myself up in my shawl and subsiding into a corner of the landau. “However, anything to oblige a friend; and as you make such a point of it, I will try and do the civil to your admirable Crichton.”

## CHAPTER XXV.

### I DISTINGUISH MYSELF WITH THE MULKAPORE HOUNDS.

To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus,  
And witch the world with noble horsemanship.

*Henry IV.*

THE reading-room at the Club was a general lounge and rendezvous. When it was too dark to play tennis, and too early to go home to dinner, people flocked in, ostensibly to select novels and read the papers, but in reality to chat, gossip, and flirt.

One evening, Ellen Fox and I were turning over the newly-arrived English mail, and discussing the merits and demerits of some fashions in the *Queen* (a paper much affected by us both). The round table at which we were seated was pretty full ; at least twenty chairs were occupied. Close to us sat my cousin Maurice, engrossed in the *Field*, but occasionally raising his eyes, and glancing in our direction with open amusement, as he could not fail to overhear a warm argument as to whether a certain costume, which had mutually fascinated us, would look best made up in spots or checks.

"I hate checks!" I exclaimed emphatically. "Have you seen Mrs. Fleming's new *foulard*? It makes her back look like a draught-board."

"It is too large a pattern ; and then she is stout. Now, a small pattern on you——"

"Would be hideous. I have a rooted objection to checks!" I interrupted briskly.

"Well, they are going to be the rage," returned Ellen with decision. "Look at Mrs. St. Ubes. She is always in the height of the fashion, and studies the becoming more than anyone I know."

To look at Mrs. St. Ubes was easier said than done!

She and Colonel Gore were almost completely concealed behind the broad pages of a mutual *Times*. Presently Mrs. Gower came in, and, sinking into a place beside me, drew a paper towards her with what I am sure she deemed an indolent grace. After listlessly turning over the pages, she glanced round the table, and having taken a mental photograph of all the party, moved her chair a quarter of an inch towards me, and asked, in a loud stage whisper :

"Who is the woman opposite in the filthy white dress ?"

I had a perfect horror of Mrs. Gower's *sotto voce* remarks—especially in the reading-room—and hunching up my shoulders, shook my head violently as a token of complete ignorance. Seeing that there was nothing to be had from me in the way of information or conversation, Mrs. Gower turned her attention to the general company.

"Who is going out with the hounds to-morrow ?" she asked, raising her voice, and casting a comprehensive glance round the table. "First day of the season. Meet at Lungay-pillay, and chotah-hazree at the gunners' mess."

"I'm going of course," returned Mrs. St. Ubes, raising her eyes above the edge of the paper. "And I !" "And I !" "And I !" chorussed various treble and bass voices.

"You are not going, Miss Neville, are you ?" said Mrs. St. Ubes, addressing me pointedly.

"Yes, I hope so, if Colonel Keith can take me. My uncle has an engagement for to-morrow morning."

"But, my dear girl," she exclaimed with an air of affectionate patronage, "you have never ridden to hounds, and you won't be able to keep up on that titupping old grey of yours."

"Oh, I dare say I shall," I answered with rising colour. "He is much better than he looks."

"Your uncle really ought to get you something a *leetle* younger," said Mrs. St. Ubes, with the air of a person who was giving a piece of friendly advice. "I believe your old animal was all through the Mutiny, and probably present at the battles of Assaye and Plassy !"

A general smile was the result of this polite witticism.

"Then he must be *quite* a veteran," said Mrs. Vane, coming to the table, regardless of the cavalier she had suddenly deserted in an adjoining window-seat. "Age is

to be respected, is it not, Mrs. Stubbs? I beg your pardon—St. Ubes, I mean.”

Now, the weak point in Mrs. St. Ubes’s armour was her age. She was keenly alive to any allusion to years, and dreaded the census no less than the Black Plague.

“In horses certainly,” she answered boldly, laying down the paper and facing her antagonist.

“But Miss Neville’s old Bucephalus is perhaps entering on his second childhood, and that is the reason he appears to be a reliable mount. Anyway, he is perfectly quiet, which is the chief desideratum. He goes in double and single harness, carries a lady, gentleman, or child; in fact does everything but wait at table.”

“Hear her! Oh ye shades of the Darefield Hunt!”

A rash rejoinder was on the tip of my tongue; but fortunately I caught Maurice’s eyes fastened on my crimson face with a look of mingled enquiry and amusement. Before I could make a more moderate reply, Mrs. Vane (who had evidently taken the matter into her own hands) observed:

“Miss Neville is too modest to speak for herself, but I believe she is a very fair horsewoman; quite up to the average of lady-riders, and no more afraid of a fidgety mount than you are yourself, Mrs. St. Ubes.”

“Can you ride, Miss Neville?” asked Mrs. St. Ubes, almost turning her back to Mrs. Vane, and speaking as if she were putting me on my oath.

“Of course I can,” I replied confidently.

After a pause of a few seconds, during which she and Colonel Gore were engaged in an animated colloquy behind the newspaper, Colonel Gore’s head abruptly emerged, and said:

“I can lend you a gee for to-morrow, Miss Neville, if you like. A little hot-tempered or so, but——”

“Oh!” interrupted Mrs. St. Ubes, with a sneer; “if Miss Neville can really ride as she *says* she can, she won’t mind ‘Promotion.’”

“Well, at any rate he has no vice; and if Miss Neville does not want a very quiet mount, and will honour me by riding him, I am sure I shall be only too delighted,” added Colonel Gore meekly.

“Thanks, very much,” I murmured; “but my uncle does not like my riding other people’s horses.”

A glance of unspeakable significance was here thrown round the company by Mrs. St. Ubes; it said most distinctly: "*She is afraid!*"

"I will be surety for your uncle's consent," said Mrs. Vane, nodding towards me; "so you can accept Colonel Gore's kind offer. In fact, I myself shall ride your despised old Methuselah, though I am no great equestrian. I too will come out and see this wonderful hunt. I shall, of course, provide myself with a pair of field-glasses; and I dare say, with their assistance, and if the old horse can gallop at all, I may be able to keep the stragglers in sight."

"Very well, then, Miss Neville; it is settled that you ride my horse to-morrow, and Mrs. Vane rides yours," said Colonel Gore, politely; "I will send down for your saddle this evening."

"Thank you," I replied, feeling a good deal of apprehension touching Uncle Jim's views of the arrangement.

"What is the name of your venerable animal?" asked Mrs. St. Ubes, with an air of affectionate interest.

"Oxford Gray," I answered, barely raising my eyes from my paper, and speaking in my chilliest tone.

"Oxford Gray!" shrieked Mrs. St. Ubes; "what a name! Why not 'Turkey Red,' or 'Green Baize,' or 'Navy Blue,' at *once*?"

"Come, come, come!" expostulated Mrs. Vane, gaily; "I am sure you have all laughed at him quite enough; you have had a board on him, in military parlance, and he has been *cast*. What is the good of pouring water on a drowned rat? Are there any arrangements to be made about this hunt to-morrow?"

After some discussion, it was settled that we were all to assemble at the Club, and to go to the meet in a body, it being about three miles from Mulkapore.

As we drove home Mrs. Vane said, "I had no idea of letting that woman trample on you; what a spiteful little wretch it is! She has no special ill-will towards you; merely dislikes you in common with the whole of her sex. But she hates *me* with all her heart; and knowing that you are my friend, and no match for her, she pays you out for *my* sins; you are my scapegoat."

Next morning, by dimmest daylight, a tall, raking-looking, chestnut horse awaited me at the mounting-block,



with "Colonel Gore's compliments." I did not like the look of his eye, nor the way he laid back his ears, but I had no time to take these details into consideration, as Mrs. Vane was mounted, and we were already late.

"Now, Noah," she said impressively, as we sallied forth from the compound, "mind you distinguish yourself; you look as if you could hold your own, and if you don't ride the head off Mrs. St. Ubes—in the vulgar idiom—I'll never speak to you again; so mind that!"

We then indulged in a mild trot, which brought us to the Club enclosure, where nearly all the party were already assembled; Mrs. St. Ubes, on a pretty bay Arab, was the centre of attraction to a laughing circle. Their mirth ceased with *ominous* abruptness as we approached.

"So you really *have* come," exclaimed Mrs. St. Ubes. "We began to think you had cried off—changed your mind at the eleventh hour! However, so far so good," she added with an air of supreme condescension, as she looked me over with a keen and critical eye. Happily there was nothing that even she could cavil at in my well-cut dark blue Wolmerhausen and "Terai" hat. "You are quite sure that you feel up to it? You are not nervous, are you?" she asked with a smile, intended to be sweetly solicitous.

"Not in the smallest degree," I retorted composedly. "Very many thanks, but you need not be anxious on *my* account," I concluded, with a spice of temper on my tongue.

"Well, recollect that Colonel Gore does not hold himself responsible for any *accident* that may occur."

This was certainly cheering intelligence. And with this parting thrust, Mrs. St. Ubes turned and trotted her horse away.

Maurice, who had been listening attentively to our conversation, now ranged up alongside on a fine gray Australian.

"Give him his head, Miss Neville, and he'll go all right, I dare say. At any rate, I shall keep near you and look after you."

"That won't be of much use, unless you think you can *catch* me when I tumble off," was my ungrateful rejoinder.

A sudden move was now made, and we all found our-

selves out on the green plain surrounding the Club. No sooner had we set foot on the grass, than Mrs. St. Ubes and Miss Hudson passed me at a furious gallop, expressly with the intention of setting off my horse. Of this I am firmly persuaded. It answered the purpose admirably. He immediately shook his great fiddle head, gave a loud snort and a squeal, and made some extraordinary evolution impossible to describe; his head had totally disappeared between his forelegs, and I seemed to be riding a headless animal. Another acrobatic feat, and I still remained; but at a third I felt confident that I *must* go. Luckily for me he contented himself with these two awful buck jumps, and settled down into a tearing gallop.

"You sat him splendidly, Miss Neville," shouted Maurice, whose horse was stretching away alongside of mine. "He only wants a good breather now, and he will be all right. But he is by no means a mount for a timid elderly gentleman, and anything but a lady's horse. If Mrs. St. Ubes had been on his back just now, he would have 'promoted' her, to a dead certainty."

At the liberal pace at which we were travelling we soon distanced the others, and were amongst the first arrivals at the meet—a clump of toddy-trees at the side of a road. The hounds—poor exiles from their native land and drafts from many celebrated English kennels—were grouped round Verasawney, the Black Kennel huntsmen, and the M. F. H. himself, a most popular man—"A rare good sporting sort," to quote Maurice—was in the act of descending from his dog-cart as we rode up. The meet was not a lengthy proceeding. Soon we moved on to draw a favourite cover—the bed of a river, where we beat for a "Jack," and he was almost immediately viewed away, nonchalantly cantering up the opposite bank, as much as to say: "Don't you wish you may catch me?"

We lost no time in fording the shallow water, and in a very few seconds were speeding away across a flat open country, as fast as our horses could carry us; not an obstacle to be seen, there was nothing to stop us. I let "Promotion" go his best, and rode him at the very tail of the hounds, a little in advance of Mrs. St. Ubes, who was riding, very jealous, I could see, and disputing every inch of ground with almost vicious emulation.

After about two miles of plain sailing the country became more intricate — paddy-fields were disagreeably frequent, and, when we got among stony ground, Mrs. St. Ubes's cat-like Arab had decidedly the advantage of my big blundering horse.

After this, again open country, and the pace and distance now began to tell; and to keep the leading hounds in view was quite as much as most of us could manage; whilst many of the stragglers began to tail off. About a dozen still held gallantly on, including Mrs. St. Ubes, Miss Hudson, Maurice, and myself; but he and I were gradually outpacing the Arabs of the party, and I was putting "Promotion" along at a pace that I flatter myself considerably astonished that ill-tempered, rawboned gentleman.

I was slightly in advance of Maurice when a shout from behind of "Hold hard—ware nullah!" gave me a sudden start. Sure enough, right in front, at a distance of about thirty yards, a huge yawning nullah, with ragged, broken sides, gaped before us. It was either in or over. To refuse it, would have been to lose the rest of the run.

"For Heaven's sake, Miss Neville!" shouted someone. I heard no more. My Irish blood was most thoroughly "up," and I would have ridden at a stone quarry under the circumstances. With a tremendous cut of my whip I rushed "Promotion" at it, and landed safe and sound on the other side. I was instantly followed by Maurice, the master, and a well-known sporting little major, and that was all! I had—oh, ecstatic thought!—pounded Mrs. St. Ubes, and cut down the rest of the field. I did not care for that so much; but to have left my rival planted on the other side—and that the *wrong* side—was indeed a most blissful reflection.

There was no going round possible nearer than half-a-mile, so we had an immense lead, a lead which we took good care to keep. The Jack was now nearly dead beat; but so were the unacclimatised English hounds, and although Ganymede and Governess were within twenty yards of his brush, he made good his escape, popping into a hole among some rocks, almost under their disappointed noses. We had been running for nearly forty minutes, and were not sorry to turn our horses' heads in the direction of a small breeze off a neighbouring tank, and to fan our heated faces

with our handkerchiefs. As we moved off slowly towards home, Mrs. St. Ubes and the rest of the crowd came galloping up ; and the party to my great astonishment included Mrs. Vane.

"Killed of course !" cried Mrs. St. Ubes. "My stupid Arab would not jump that nullah, and that threw me out completely. *You* would not have been up" (turning to me) "if you had not been so splendidly mounted."

This remark was evidently intended to repress any undue elation on my part.

"There I can't agree with you," exclaimed the master ; "Miss Neville's riding is quite sufficient to warrant her being with the hounds in any country, and I never saw a more awkward brute to ride than that hard-mouthed old steeplechaser. Honour to whom honour is due. Pray" (turning to me gallantly), "pray, Miss Neville, where did you learn to witch the world with matchless horsemanship ?"

Could I say : "In the fields about *Gallow*, and with the Darefield hounds ?" Most emphatically not with Maurice among the audience.

"At home long ago ; all Irish girls can ride," I returned evasively, endeavouring to change the conversation, to which Mrs. St. Ubes had been listening in disdainful silence, and with a face expressive of the deepest mortification—mortification she could not conceal. She was certainly in a very bad humour, and no wonder ; she had intended (if I did not break my neck) that I should furnish forth excellent sport for the Philistines ; and behold, I had cut her out completely, and, in spite of my rough-and-ready mount, the honours of the day were *mine*. We rode slowly back towards the cantonments, as the sun was rising and the day was getting hot. Maurice had constituted himself my escort, and kept at my side until a long expanse of wet paddy-fields compelled us to move in single file (like a string of ducks) along the very narrow slippery causeway or bund, that was the only visible pathway.

Not one European out of a hundred has seen an Indian paddy-field ; truly no very lovely sight, especially at the time of year to which I am referring. The young grain was buried in at least a foot of muddy water, which had been turned on to irrigate the coming crop. Here and

there, the muddy expanse was crossed and recrossed by narrow little banks of slippery grey mud, whose use was twofold, as a means of keeping in the water and as a mode of transit. Along the very narrowest of these, the whole hunting-party were cautiously navigating their horses. One was literally between Scylla and Charybdis ; a slip on either side would entail the most unpleasant consequences.

Our procession was headed by Colonel Gore, followed by Mrs. St. Ubes ; then came Miss Hudson (whose face was flushed to a rich beetroot colour), then I came, then Maurice.

The two ladies in front were discoursing and laughing in a very high and scornful key, and comparing the late run to various former ones (much to its disadvantage), when, unluckily, Miss Hudson's horse made a stumble, and, on recovering himself, cannoned violently against Mrs. St. Ubes's Arab, who, in spite of frantic exertions to keep his footing, slipped off the narrow causeway, and fell back into the muddy, greasy paddy. What a scene of excitement ensued ! although there was no danger whatever incurred by the unfortunate rider, beyond a muddy habit. The horse persisted in making the most valiant efforts to right himself, and dashed up the mud in a manner fearful to witness, much less experience ; and for once, his mistress had a complete ducking. First, she was fished out ; then her steed. What a spectacle she presented ! I could compare her to nothing but myself on the day of my disastrous drive in the mule-cart.

How angry she was ! though too much a woman of the world to give full expression to her feelings. Her eyes were actually blazing, and I *think* she favoured Miss Hudson with a few private but pungent remarks, of anything but an agreeable nature. As we emerged into the road once more, we left Mrs. St. Ubes standing under a toddy-tree, with two syces in attendance, busily rubbing her down with wisps of grass, whilst Colonel Gore stood by, superintending the performance with grave solicitude. We walked our horses slowly on, to enable them to overtake us, and Maurice again resumed his place beside me, and took up the thread of our late discourse.

What a difference there was in our relative positions since we had last ridden together (at Gallow) ! Then I, the

ugly little hoyden, was deeply penetrated by the honour my cousin did me in permitting me to accompany him ; and I eagerly picked up any stray crumbs of conversation that my reluctant escort condescended to throw me. Now, the position was reversed. I, the grown-up young lady, the Diana of the day, was good enough to allow Captain Beresford to ride at my right hand, and he bore himself as became the grateful recipient of a considerable favour. We were not altogether alone ; Mrs. Vane completed our trio. Radiant with satisfaction, she tapped me on the shoulder with her whip.

"That's what *I* call swift poetical justice," she exclaimed, indicating with a backward jerk of her head the deplorable figure under the toddy-tree. "She wished to make you ridiculous on that great raw-boned brute," glancing contemptuously at my mount, "and instead of that she has been 'cut down,' to use a hunting-phrase, and after her experiences in the paddy, she will certainly have to be 'hung up to dry.' She has been 'hoist with her own petard'—ha, ha, ha!" Here Mrs. Vane's joy was so exuberant, that she lost all recollection of where she was ; and clapped her hands, a manoeuvre that had the effect of starting off "Oxford Gray" at a round canter. Seeing that "forward" was the word now passed on, we immediately followed her example, and were soon scattered over the plain, racing and chasing in the direction of our well-earned chotah-hazree. We found our goal, laid out under an immense banyan-tree, in the Artillery mess compound. A snowy table, covered with fruit, flowers, cold fowl, ham, and game pies, was a welcome sight to many ; a dozen busy servants came swarming round with hot dishes, tea, coffee, and cold iced drinks. Most people were thirsty, and the latter were in great demand. Maurice waited on Mrs. Vane and me most assiduously, and did the honours well. In vain he pressed us to take some claret and water ; we both declared for a good strong cup of Neilgherry tea ; but I saw Mrs. St. Ubes, who sat immediately opposite, consoling herself with an iced brandy and soda. Having supplied our wants, Maurice had leisure to satisfy his own.

"I'm dying of thirst," he observed, taking up a long tumbler and quaffing off its contents. "Ah!" he exclaimed, putting down his glass reluctantly ; "on such a

hot morning as this I'm inclined to agree with an old poacher at home, who used to wish 'that his throat was half a mile long, that he might taste the drink all the way down.'"

A roar of laughter greeted this reminiscence, and, completely off my guard, I muttered, "Poor Gilligan!"

"*What* did you say, Miss Neville?" asked Maurice eagerly.

"Oh nothing—nothing at all!" I returned, greatly confused, and assuming a sudden and energetic search for my whip and gloves.

"Nothing!" he echoed, looking at me steadily. "Oh, well, I really thought I heard you mention the fellow's name. But of course it must have been imagination," he added, still looking intently at me, with his earnest dark gray eyes. I think it was his eyes, with their thick black lashes and straight well-marked eyebrows, that lent the great charm to Maurice's face. A chiselled nose and heavy moustache are not an uncommon sight; but such eyes as Maurice's were certainly not to be met with every day.

"Do you know, Miss Neville, that I have only seen one girl ride like you in all my life. I did not think she had her equal until now. She was a little cousin of mine, and you remind me of her in other ways besides your riding."

"What was she like?" I asked audaciously; "was she pretty?"

"No—o, certainly not *pretty*," he answered slowly; "but you know that plain people do resemble pretty people sometimes," he concluded impressively.

"In what way do I resemble her?" I inquired with bold persistence; "admitting that we are both plain."

"There is a look in your eyes when you are excited or amused——"

"I declare," interrupted Mrs. Vane, impatiently, "you have a regular monomania on the subject of family likenesses." (She was seated at the other side of Maurice.) "First Miss Neville is like your grandmother! Now it is a little cousin. The next time it will be someone nearer and dearer—your lost *fiancée*, for instance," lowering her voice to a whisper.

At this remark my cheeks outrivalled the traditional

---

cherry. I bent my head, and busied myself intently on peeling a plantain; and Mrs. Vane, having assumed the reins of conversation, gaily drove away in quite another direction, thus avoiding all dangerous topics and delicate ground.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### I MAKE A PUBLIC CONFESSION.

“I will enchant thine ear.”

MOST of the people in Mulkapore were invited to a grand entertainment, given by a native nobleman at his palace in the city. It was my first experience of anything of the kind, and I was considerably impressed as we drove under an archway into a large enclosed square, lined with mounted troops, in wildly picturesque uniform, and lit up by huge flaming torches. We were received at the entrance by our host and his friends, and conducted upstairs to an open courtyard, carpeted with white cloth, and in the midst of which a fountain of Italian marble cooled the air with its lightly-falling spray. Here we found many of our acquaintances promenading about, or sitting on the surrounding sofas, awaiting the arrival of the Resident, and the signal for dinner. After a short delay we were all filing off dinnerwards, two and two. I think, including the native princes and gentlemen, we must have numbered at least a hundred and fifty; and we formed a most imposing procession, as we passed through the various anterooms and took our places at table. As I looked up and down, the scene reminded me of some superb banquet in the “Arabian Nights.”

Three sides of the room were literally lined with large mirrors in coloured cut-glass panels. The ceiling was the same, and hanging from it were numbers of glittering chandeliers multiplying themselves in a thousand reflections. The fourth side of the apartment was open to a large courtyard (similar to the one in which we had been received); the high surrounding walls were illuminated by three rows of coloured lamps, whose brilliant hues quite extinguished the stars that looked down, pale and twinkling,

from the dark blue vault above. The table, narrow but immensely long, was loaded with exquisite flowers and a profusion of superb plate. Looking down the long vista at either side of me, brilliant uniforms and gay evening toilettes met my eyes in dazzling numbers. The brave and the fair were well represented. Here and there a native nobleman varied the monotony of European garb, and gave a *raison d'être* to this magnificent Eastern entertainment. During the whole length of the repast a first-class string band delighted our ears, and bright crimson lights were burnt at intervals in the courtyard, making everything completely *couleur de rose*, and throwing a glamour over the whole scene that made one think oneself in Fairyland, and almost expect that at the striking of an hour, or crowing of a cock, crash would go the palace, out would go the lights, and the whole edifice, guests and all, would disappear like the "garden of the world" in Hans Andersen's fairy tale.

Right opposite to me sat Mrs. Gower and Maurice, an ill-assorted couple. A little lower down, through the screen of floral arrangements, I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Vane's cream damassé dress and pretty animated face. I had for my partner Mrs. St. Ubes's friend Mephistopheles, and on my left hand Uncle Jim. When the first half-dozen "rankest" ladies had been coupled off, the remainder of the guests went in according to their own choice; the gentleman, in the sudden tumult excited by the announcement of dinner, generally blindly seizing on the lady nearest to him. No greater stickler for precedence existed than Mrs. Gower. To be sent in to dinner after a lady she considered beneath her in the social scale, envenomed her remarks, and destroyed her appetite during the ensuing meal. At the present moment she was happy. A very stupid, very greedy old colonel had led her to the festive board, and thus completely vindicated her right to a high situation on the ladder of rank. Her escort was a noted *bon-vivant*, and was certain to devote his mouth to but one object, viz., discussing the succulent morsels and dainty dishes soon to be set before his critical eye. He deliberately unfolded his napkin, carefully arranged his various glasses and knives and forks, and set himself solemnly to study the *menu*.

Not a word, not a remark, would he vouchsafe beyond "champagne," "more ice," "bring back the *pâté*," etc., until dinner was concluded. As far as Mrs. Gower was concerned, his silence was a complete matter of indifference to her; for had she not, on her left hand, that very good-looking young gunner, Captain Beresford?—a *tête-à-tête* with whom would be a rich compensation for the taciturnity of her other neighbour.

As dinner progressed, and the unimpeachable champagne began to circulate, conversation became more general and more brilliant. Mephistopheles and I were the one exception to the surrounding sociability. We had neither tastes nor topics in common, and our talk visibly flagged. He was an utterly bored and *blasé*-looking dandy, to whom even the adjustment of his eye-glass was a toil and a trouble. He held that "there was nothing new, and nothing true, and that it did not signify;" and the only person he thoroughly and implicitly believed in, was *himself*. His favourite expression was "Just so;" and he generally extinguished all my feeble remarks and observations with this damping rejoinder. It was a conversational *cul-de-sac*, and excluded farther incursions into any subject; and as I was not prepared to administer piquant, risky little stories to his jaded palate, like his *vis-à-vis* Mrs. Gower, I was not worth the trouble of entertaining.

He looked across at her repeatedly, with all the eloquence of which his cynical face was master, in order to convey to her how much he wished he were in Maurice's shoes; and if Maurice's countenance was any index to his feelings, I think he would have changed places with the greatest alacrity. Uncle Jim was wholly absorbed in exchanging and comparing Shikar experiences with his neighbour (a stranger from Bengal), and had no leisure, even to attend to his dinner—which was all that the human palate could desire! Seeing how dull we were at our side of the table, Mrs. Gower occasionally vouchsafed to include us in the conversation, and to direct some remarks to Mephistopheles and me. As the board was narrow we chimed in with the greatest ease.

"Have you seen the new spin, Mrs. Gower?" enquired my partner languidly.

"Oh yes! a dark sallow little thing, come out to keep

house for her brother, until she can contrive to get one for herself. For my part, I hate these shikarry young women."

"Oh, come, Mrs. Gower!" expostulated Maurice good-naturedly; "surely a girl may come out to live with her brother without any ulterior designs; especially an orphan, like Miss Fuller, who has no other relatives. I think she is a remarkably nice, ladylike girl, and am——"

"Quite disposed to be her champion," interrupted Mrs. Gower smartly. "Well, I cannot say that I admire your taste. She reminds me forcibly of a black monkey."

"According to Mr. Darwin, we were *all* monkeys," returned Maurice with imperturbable gravity. "I was reading somewhere lately that we were descended from a race of apes on the borders of the Mediterranean, who learnt accidentally how to use the muscles of the thumb."

"How interesting!" sneered Mrs. Gower, drawing down the corners of her mouth. "If *you* like to consider yourself a direct descendant of these unusually intelligent monkeys, you have my full permission to do so, Captain Beresford," she observed, with a significant glance across at Mephistopheles, as much as to say, "you see how I snub him!"

"Mrs. Gower's permission is a command," replied Maurice with a profound bow. "In future, I shall consider myself an orang-outang; my only regret being that Mrs. Gower and I no longer belong to the same *species*. Allow me to give you some of this very excellent aspic," he added politely.

Mrs. Gower, a well-known epicure, was evidently much softened by this little attention.

"How is it, Captain Beresford," she asked between two dainty morsels, "that you have never called on *me*?"

This was indeed a home question.

"Really," stammered Maurice; "really, I have had a lot of work to do of late, and no time for visiting"—I believe this to have been an unmitigated fib—"but I hope to retrieve my character very shortly."

"I know you thought it an awful infliction in having to sit next to *me* this evening," she continued, eyeing him smilingly over her champagne-glass.

"Pardon me," returned Maurice, "I was only too glad of the opportunity it afforded me of making your acquaint-

ance, and paying the homage I have hitherto been unable to offer."

"Oh! come! come! you must not say such fine things to an old woman like me," rejoined Mrs. Gower—who *au fond* was the vainest woman in the presidency—greatly delighted, and rapping him playfully on the knuckles with her fan.

"*Old!*" echoed Maurice, eyeing her with unrestrained astonishment, "your ideas of old age and mine don't tally; and age would be robbed of all its terrors if old women looked like *you!*"

"Well—how old do you really think I am?" asked Mrs. Gower, with a sweet insinuating smile.

"I never presume to think of ladies' ages. All ladies are necessarily young and charming."

"Well, you may think of mine, at any rate. Come, how old am I?" enquired Mrs. Gower with her most sprightly glance.

"If I were to say what I think, perhaps I may err on the wrong side, and you will never forgive. The risk is too great for me to run," observed Maurice, with a deprecating air.

Humbug, thy name is Irishman!

"Never mind, go on," she cried impatiently.

"Well"—bending closer, and speaking in a low, confidential tone—"you must pardon me, if I am wrong; India ages people. You are eight-and-twenty."

Oh, Maurice! Maurice! and she must have been upwards of forty.

"Not at all a bad shot," returned Mrs. Gower, in great delight; "I shall be twenty-nine next month."

I looked at my cousin in blank amazement. Could this be the Maurice of Gallow?—a match for the renowned Mrs. Gower, and perfectly equal to the task of feeding even her enormous appetite for admiration; for, now that she had an inward conviction (ably seconded by her looking-glass) that her charms were slipping from her, she was more than ever tenacious of the shadow that still remained; and, although, as I have said before, she no longer publicly posed for a beauty, she was more rapacious of compliments—the echo of what had once been perhaps her lawful due—than anyone within the wide precincts of the cantonments of Mulkapore.

I heard Maurice compare her powers of conversation to Madame de Staël; the shape of her head and profile he swore was absolutely classic, and I distinctly heard him state that her presence alone was sufficient to add a lustre to any entertainment. After a while conversation took another turn. Ireland and the Irish were the new topic; and in this discussion Mephistopheles and I listlessly joined, contributing a few desultory remarks, till Mrs. Gower roused herself and politely informed us that she "hated the Irish." She would have endeared herself to Dr. Johnson, for she was an admirable hater.

"I *hate* the Irish!" she reiterated, "*detest* them! Their appearance, manners, accent, country, and everything about them. There are none of the nation in the neighbourhood?" she asked, glancing round with affected caution.

"Then in your case, I presume, 'No Irish need apply,'" said Maurice, ignoring her question.

"Most certainly *not*," she answered promptly.

"I am truly concerned to hear you say so, for I belong to that most distressful country."

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed with indignant incredulity.

"It is a solemn fact! I wish my rents were as sure. My father and grandfather were Irish; and I am only a 'Sassenach' by the mere accident of having been born in England. I actually own a bog of very considerable dimensions. *Now* do you believe me?"

"I suppose I have no choice. However, you know I have the sense to discern between people individually and people *en masse*. There are Irish and Irish," with an air of benignant toleration. "By-the-way, Miss Neville," addressing me, "you are Irish too, are you not?"

"Yes," I made answer in my meekest manner.

"Colonel Neville," she continued, raising her voice and leaning towards uncle, "I heard such an odd discussion the other day, as to whether Miss Neville was *your* niece or Mrs. Neville's. I said that of course she was yours."

"My wife's niece," returned stupid old Uncle Jim, merely glancing up for one second, vexed at being interrupted in an animated argument relative to the length of tigers' tails.

"Oh, really," cried Mrs. Gower with raised brows,

"how immensely funny; then your name is not Neville, of course?" she paused, addressing me pointedly.

"Now it is coming," I thought, tightly clasping my hands in my lap, and feeling the very blood freeze in my veins. "No it is not," I answered courageously, and looking Mrs. Gower steadily in the face.

"May we make bold to ask your real name? as they say in your country; or is it a family secret?" she asked with a malicious smile. She saw that there was some mystery, and was determined to probe it to its source. I glanced helplessly at Uncle Jim. He was still carrying on the argument with all a sportsman's ardour, and was entirely lost to any sense of his immediate surroundings. Seeing him help himself to sugar and cream along with his asparagus, I gave up all hopes of succour from that quarter, and felt that I had better depend on myself alone, and tell the plain unvarnished truth. It must be known some time, why not now? I glanced across the table; Maurice's eyes were fastened on my face, and Mrs. Gower was leaning back in her chair, regarding me with an air of spiteful amusement.

"Well?" she drawled superciliously.

"You wish to know my original name, and you are quite welcome to hear it. *You* will not be much wiser, Mrs. Gower. My name is really O'Neill—Nora O'Neill," I answered, now driven to bay.

"Oh, really; quite an Irish name. But not nearly as pretty as Neville, is it, Captain Beresford?" turning to her neighbour.

Thanks be to Captain Beresford, his composure was marvellous. He gave no outward sign of having made an important discovery. He did not rise, and rush madly round the table, and seize me, and say, "At last, my long lost cousin." No; he merely gave me a glance of extreme significance, and calmly went on with his dinner, still keeping up the ball of conversation with unflagging energy. As for me, I dropped my share of the toy, and sat in dumb silence, for the remainder of the meal, shifting myself as much as possible behind a large maiden-hair fern. Still I could not conceal myself altogether, and I felt that Maurice's eyes were on me more than once, as I sat, silent, pale, and nervous, behind my leafy screen. How glad I was when

the signal to move was given, and with a general pushing back of chairs, we rose and left the table! Mephistopheles and I parted with mutual alacrity, once he had left me in auntie's keeping. How I longed to unburthen my mind to her! but she had been seized upon by a lady friend, and I saw no chance of getting in even one word edgeways. Her companion was mounted on her favourite hobby, "the servants," and was riding it with great zeal and spirit. Her cook drank, her ayah took opium, her maty stole the kerosene oil, and her syces made away with the gram. When she entered upon the sins of a previous generation, I lost all patience, and gladly responded to Mrs. Vane's invitation to come upstairs and see the pictures.

We toiled up a broad, steep flight of stairs, and found ourselves in a long gallery overlooking the court below. We paused, leant over the balustrade, and looked down on the gay scene beneath us, where long-trained dresses and gorgeous uniforms were promenading up and down together, and displaying the bravery of their toilets to the utmost advantage. Scattered among them were numbers of the native nobles, clad in long velvet coats fastened with magnificent gold and diamond belts, and wearing small elaborately folded white or pink turbans.

I had not been long a beholder of this brilliant spectacle when I felt someone come and stand beside me. It did not need a glance at the dark blue and gold sleeve that rested on the balcony to tell me who it was.

"So, Nora," said Maurice gravely, "I have found you at last! I had a presentiment that we should meet."

"Found what?" enquired Mrs. Vane, raising herself from a leaning posture, and looking curiously round.

"Found my runaway, long-lost cousin, Nora O'Neill," returned Maurice, laying his hand on mine.

"What?" she exclaimed. "*What* do you tell me—the cousin you told George about?" opening her eyes very wide, and staring incredulously, first at one and then at the other of us.

"Yes, the very same," he replied in a tone that must have carried conviction to her ears.

"You don't mean to ask me to believe that she and Miss Neville are one and the same?" she said, suddenly sitting down with an air of complete mental and physical prostration.



"Nora O'Neill has just confessed to her identity with Miss Neville before a dozen reliable witnesses."

"So *you* are Nora O'Neill," said Mrs. Vane, looking at me steadily, and grasping the situation with her usual alertness of mind. "Why, this is absolutely delicious food for a three-volume novel. I declare I'll write one, and call it 'The Mystery of Mulkapore,' or 'Miss Neville's Secret.' What a small place the world is after all!" she continued with a comprehensive wave of her fan. "Fancy losing a young lady among the bogs of Ireland, and finding her at our Indian banquet!"

"Ireland is not *all* bog," expostulated Maurice seriously.

"What a deep, artful girl!" resumed Mrs. Vane, apostrophising me. "How you have taken me in! I really don't know what I am to say to you."

"What am I to say to her? I think that is more to the purpose," interrupted Maurice with a smile.

"Do you know that I told her her own story," continued Mrs. Vane with increased animation, "as a romantic tale, as a great secret. Oh, you sly girl!" addressing me. "How demure you looked! Now I know why you laughed so immoderately; now I understand why you blushed so rosy red. Go away, you abominable little deceiver," giving me a playful push. "I am quite ashamed to have been taken in by such a mere child, such a little Puritan puss!"

"Take her away, and give her a good scolding, Captain Beresford. She ought to be kept on bread and water for six months, and solitary confinement into the bargain."

Mrs. Vane's flow of language had given me ample time to compose myself, and had quite taken the awkward edge off my meeting with Maurice.

"Come away," he said. "Come along, and look at the pictures. I shall certainly take your advice into consideration," he remarked to Mrs. Vane, as we moved on together. "You see," he observed, "I was not so *very* far wrong when I traced a strong family likeness in you to Molly Beresford."

"I wonder you never suspected me. I wonder you never discovered me before," I answered, now quite at my ease.

"I sincerely echo both remarks. Now that I really know the *truth*, I marvel at my own obtuseness. But I

never imagined that my cousin Nora had any relatives out here, much less that she was niece to Mrs. Neville. Now I understand why you avoided me. It was not altogether because you disliked me?" he asked earnestly.

"Oh, no!" I replied with much frankness.

"Tell me, Nora," motioning me into a chair in a large empty drawing-room, "tell me honestly, why did you run away?"

No answer.

"It has turned out very well as it happened; but it was one chance in a thousand. You don't know what madness it was, for a young girl like you to set off in such a manner to seek your fortune. You cannot imagine all the trouble and anxiety you caused!"

"To whom?" I asked sharply.

"Well, to me, for one, to your governess, and to Mr. French."

"Look here, Maurice," I said, standing up to give additional force to my words, "I did run away; I am not denying the fact, nor am I one bit ashamed of it. I have gained a very happy home, where no one lectures me"—pointedly. "Mr. French and Miss Flucker showed me no kindness, and she was only too glad to be rid of me, if the truth were known. I was *miserable* at Gallow," I concluded, emphatically.

"Yes, I know," he interrupted, hastily; "but why did you not let *me* know? I would have done anything to make you happy and comfortable."

"Do you think that I would have stayed at Gallow, knowing what I *knew*?" I cried, crimson to the roots of my hair and the tips of my ears. It was one thing to repudiate Maurice by means of a sheet of paper and pen and ink, and quite another to do so to his *face*, as he stood before me, regarding me with a look of grave, earnest interest. "Listen to me, Cousin Maurice," I went on, with trembling voice, and almost breathless with excitement and nervousness. "As cousins, let us always be friends," said I, holding out my hand. "As cousin, I am only too glad to claim you; but we will bury grandfather's bargain in the deepest oblivion, and never refer to it as long as we live. Promise me," I faltered, almost in tears.

"I'll see about it," replied Maurice evasively, but press-

ing my fingers most reassuringly, as an influx of sight-seers put an end to our *tête-à-tête*. I wonder what the first arrivals thought, when they saw Maurice and me standing in the centre of the apartment, hand locked in hand ! We went downstairs together and visited the library, the armoury, and the china-room, and rejoined auntie and Mrs. Vane, on the best of easy, cousinly terms. The latter had diplomatically announced to our most intimate friends "that Captain Beresford and Miss Neville had discovered that they were cousins !"

So everything went on velvet ; and as Maurice carefully wrapped me up in my Rampore chuddar and handed me to the carriage, I felt by no means sorry that I had been bound out.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

Whilst overhead the moon sits arbitress.—*Paradise Lost.*

MAURICE became one of our family circle quite easily and naturally. Auntie liked him, uncle liked him, Mrs. Vane liked him, and it only remained for me to follow their example; and I found that I soon outrivalled all in the heartiness of my welcome. He had permission to go and come as he pleased, and he "pleased" to come almost daily, although the Artillery lines were quite three miles from our part of the world. He thought nothing of joining our morning rides, or calling in for a cup of five o'clock tea on his way to polo or tennis. He and Uncle Jim founded a firm friendship on the broad basis of a mutual taste for shikar, and many a day they passed together shooting duck or snipe; together also they spent cool nights and early dawns in ambush for the bruin of the country, and Maurice laid two superb bearskins, literally and figuratively, at auntie's feet. He rapidly made his way into her good graces by his bright amusing manners and his sympathy with her animal friends, who had unanimously adopted him as one of the family, and accorded him a loud ovation whenever he appeared. Indeed, one of them, a hideous barrack cur, called Tuppence, insisted on presenting himself, considering Maurice as his master altogether.

Tuppence was a large, ugly, nondescript white dog; not a setter, not a spaniel, not a retriever, not really belonging to any known tribe, but, like many plain people, of most engaging manners—and a splendid dog for retrieving duck.

Maurice never hinted, in the most distant manner, by word or look, that he even remembered the hateful compact

that once had bound us to each other ; so I speedily put all recollection of it among my least-used thoughts, and met my cousin on the footing of a former playfellow and companion, whose evil deeds had been blurred out and effaced by the kindly hand of time, and for whom I entertained a sincere and sisterly regard. There was a very agreeable and piquant sensation in knowing an extremely good-looking young man on such friendly and unusual terms—a young man who was *not* my brother, to whom I was *not* engaged, but who, nevertheless, called me by my Christian-name, criticised my dress and my manners, and with whom I had many early (if not wholly agreeable) reminiscences in common, and with whom I could converse as freely and as candidly as I would with my uncle or Mrs. Vane.

After dinner we generally sat in front of the house, especially on moonlight nights. Various comfortable wicker chairs were set about the gravel sweep, and whilst we ladies sipped our final cup of tea, uncle and Maurice smoked and talked shikar. I think I hear them now, arguing on the respective merits of a twelve bore, or a five-hundred express rifle as the best means of bringing down big game. Mrs. Vane, Dicky Gordon, Colonel Keith, and I would frequently leave them to their discussion, and promenade up and down the avenue in the moonlight. How cool and still were those bright white moonlight nights ! the moon casting a glamour alike flattering to the house, the surrounding trees, and foliage, and, above all, to humanity. A little gentle breeze stirred the languid leaves of the Bourgainville creeper, and rustled among the shimmering white blossoms of the cork-trees, as we strolled to and fro, and auntie took a series of forty winks, and the two sportsmen laid deep and deadly plans against poor innocent tigers, who were at that very moment stealing down to river-sides, from hot unhealthy jungles, and awaiting their supper in the shape of thirsty buffaloes and deer.

But, ardent sportsman although he was, I fancy that No. 6 shot, conical shells, and arsenical soap occasionally palled—and now and then Maurice found time to take a little turn with *me*. I remember one of our very first *tête-à-tête* quite as distinctly as if it were only yesterday. It was a bright moonlight night as we sauntered down to the gate, for a wonder—*alone*.

Our gate was not a massive iron construction, but a long, low, wooden barrier of merely four bars. Maurice was smoking his after-dinner cheroot, as he leant his arms on the top rail, and gazed out into the wide palm-fringed plain before us. The poplar-trees overhead were rippling and waving, and throwing curious fantastical flitting shadows on the white sandy ground. There was not a soul in sight, and the distant barking of a village pariah was the only sound that marred a stillness that was almost majestic.

I hated standing; and seeing no available seat, I proceeded in a most lady-like and refined (but agile) manner to climb the three low bars of the gate, and take up my position on the top rail; gathering my white skirts daintily round me, and thereby displaying an exceedingly neat pair of bronze shoes, and a *souffçon* of brown silk stockings (which, to tell the direct and plain truth, without any reservation, I may as well add that I had just as soon Maurice saw as *not*), I leant my head against the stone gate-pier and prepared for conversation.

"The old Adam," remarked my cousin, taking his cheroot out of his mouth, and glancing askance at my sudden elevation.

"Not at all," I answered briskly. "Why should I stand if I can find a seat?"

"Surely the top rail of a gate is rarely considered available as such."

"And why not?" I asked. "Why not as much as a stile? 'I'm sitting on the stile, Mary,' is a well-known quotation; why not *gate*? This one is no higher than any stile at home," I replied with playful complacency.

"Very likely; but it is not good style for you to be sitting on it. Let me bring you out a chair?"

"Maurice, next time you are thinking of making a pun, please give me timely notice, and I shall flee; puns are atrociously vulgar, ten times worse than sitting on a gate."

"Hullo," coolly interrupted my cousin, "who are the couple on the maiden?"

"Or when the moon was overhead,  
Came two young lovers lately wed"—

quoted Maurice, indicating two individuals who had just

come into view, walking arm-in-arm with an air of supreme beatitude.

"Oh, Miss Ellis and her intended, I suppose," I answered, nearly overbalancing in my endeavour to turn and obtain a good front view. "How affecting! It's all very well now; but this time two years will they take moonlight walks for the sake of each other's undiluted society?"

"I see no reason why they should not," replied Maurice, knocking the ash off his cheroot.

"Well, I fancy that they will be rather tired of one another by that time," I answered with a yawn; "cold mutton and weak tea will speedily quench sentiment. There is but little romance in darning old clothes! They will be frightfully poor"—shrugging my shoulders—"and when poverty comes in at the door, we all know that love flies out of the window."

"May I ask if these remarks are suggested by your own experience?" asked Maurice, in a tone of cool disapproval.

"How can you be so ridiculous? Certainly not!"

"Then where did you pick up these ideas? scarcely at Gallow," he observed, with lowering brows and a peremptory tone of voice.

"I picked them up, as you call it, on board ship, from a Mrs. Roper, who made me a present of a great deal of valuable advice gratis."

"Indeed, how kind of her!" ironically. "I hope you are not going to be so selfish as to keep it all to yourself. Pray share some of her golden precepts with me."

"You are most heartily welcome to all I can remember," I answered generously; "but her little hints are only intended for ladies. She imagined that I was coming out to India (to be married, as a matter of course), and gave me all manner of wise instructions. In the first place, she said that I was not to think of the military; they were pleasant, but ridiculously poor."

Here Maurice bowed with the deepest gravity.

"And she strongly recommended the civil element to my particular notice. She said," I pursued glibly, "that to marry for love and without ample means was simply madness, and that a certain amount of mutual esteem, and

a large balance at one's banker's, was the safest basis for a happy home."

"You are speaking like a book—pray continue."

"She said that it was better to be 'an old man's darling than a young man's slave.'"

"Always provided that the old man was *rich*—a *poor* old man would be a sorry bargain," interpolated Maurice rudely.

I could hear by the tone of his voice, that his temper was rising, and that he was surveying me with the gravest displeasure was only *too* apparent. Here was a grand opportunity to tease him just a little bit, and find out if his anger was as easily aroused as in days of yore. I would adopt Mrs. Roper's worldly, wicked utterances as mine own for this occasion only, and observe the result!

"She said that men were April when they woo, December when they wed," I continued fluently.

"She deserved to be tossed over to the sharks!" put in Maurice savagely.

"She said love was a kind of craze—a sort of mental disease all are liable to—especially the young—a kind of moral whooping-cough."

"That will do. I can't stand any more of Mrs. Roper just at present," interrupted my cousin brusquely. "I suppose that you young ladies would not wish for anything more intellectually interesting than a long *tête-à-tête* with that amiable woman. No doubt she had a mob of girls sitting figuratively at her feet, the whole way out. But somehow Mrs. Roper does not agree with *me*. (To judge by his face she certainly did *not*.) I should like to know if you have profited by Mrs. Roper's well-meant instructions?"

"Why not?" I asked, with a nod of easy assent, clasping my hands round my knees, and regarding the dark cloud gathering on my cousin's brow with increasing complacency.

"Although you never made us tremble for the Thames in old days, doubtless this species of social science is your second nature. I suppose you are one of Mrs. Roper's most creditable pupils?"

"More than I ever was of Miss Fluker's," I answered evasively. "Dear me! how I loathed lessons," I went on, giving way to retrospection, as I leant my chin in my hand, and gazed up at the slim young moon.



"A young lady who has so thoroughly enfranchised herself from all old-fashioned, silly ideas about romance, sentiment, and love, will never marry, of course?" pursued Maurice, in a key of scornful interrogation.

"Do I look like an old maid?" I asked, glancing down indignantly. "If you think that I am going to braid St. Catherine's tresses, you are greatly mistaken," I answered with a nod at once of defiance and decision.

"No doubt you are a very marketable young person, and are by no means disposed to underrate your own attractions," returned Maurice, giving the gate an unintentional shake that nearly precipitated me to my mother earth. "I presume you have no rooted objection to people being in love with *you*?" he added, with an air of mocking inquiry.

"Not the smallest," I replied impressively; "and now, Maurice, let me give you a capital riddle, by way of a change."

"A riddle?" he echoed ill-temperedly; "I hate riddles—never guessed one in my life."

"Well, then, it's high time you made a start; can you tell me the best way to retain affection?"

"To retain affection—to retain affection?" he muttered to himself, in a tone of reluctant speculation.

"To have lots of money, I suppose. Heaps of coin!"

"No; try again," I observed encouragingly.

"No use in my trying. I would never guess it if I stayed here till breakfast-time to-morrow."

"Well, then, I suppose I must tell you," I said graciously, leaning forward, and looking down into his handsome, scornful face, with the air of a young Minerva. "The best way to retain affection is—listen—*never to return it*. Capital, is it not?" But no applause followed; on the contrary, my cousin preserved a prolonged and somewhat unusual silence; a faint shivering of poplar leaves was the only sound to be heard for quite five minutes.

"I'm getting quite stiff," I exclaimed at last, springing lightly down and shaking out my frills and flounces; and in so doing disturbed my cousin's reflections. Turning towards me, and speaking in a very frosty tone, he said:

"I suppose you think that all your miserable adorers were merely brought into existence for the amusement of your idle hours? I am sure that that is one of the fore-

most and most important tenets in Mrs. Roper's belief. May I ask you to accept a little piece of advice from *me*? These sentiments, just now so eloquently expressed, whether in jest or in earnest, borrowed or your own private property, sit but ill upon a girl of your age, and although, goodness knows," with a deprecatory gesture, "I am no great champion for love-making, and such-like, I would strongly and most earnestly urge you to keep these opinions to yourself for the future; and *now* I think we had better go in;" as, tossing away his cheroot, he led the way towards the house, in a highly indignant frame of mind.

Hurrah! Maurice was in a temper—a cool, contemptuous, polite temper. I ran after him quickly, and, detaining him by the arm, said:

"Maurice, you are not really angry with me, are you? I was only in joke, you silly boy; indeed that was all," I urged eagerly.

He turned and surveyed me critically; but my smiling face completely dispelled his ill-humour, and with an air of intense relief, he said:

"Joking! Well, I'm sincerely glad you mentioned it. Your practical joking has merely taken a newer and more refined shape."

"You looked so serious, and so awfully shocked, Maurice, I really could not resist it, and, only my face was in the shade, you must have seen how I was giggling! I have a perfect horror of Mrs. Roper, I can assure you; and all her advice went in at one ear and out of the other."

"You seem to have remembered a good deal of it, notwithstanding," returned my companion, eyeing me dubiously.

"Well, never mind her; I am sorry I mentioned her," I answered carelessly. "Let us change the subject; it is too soon to go in yet," I went on, leaning against the gate: "tell me something about yourself. What have you been doing all these years? You are twenty-seven now, are you not?—and I am past nineteen. How time flies!"

I paused. I felt the hot blood suffuse my hair to the very roots. According to grandfather's bargain, in less than a year I would have been Maurice's *wife*. Luckily, neither my blushes, nor my sudden confusion, were noticed by my

companion ; he was leaning his arms on the gate, and staring fixedly at the stars.

"I've been soldiering most of the time ; nothing specially remarkable has happened during the last five years," he answered abstractedly.

"And have you no romance of any kind ? I'm sure you have, you were so sensitive on the subject just now," I asked in a tone of confident conviction.

"Do you think that I would confide in a little heretic like you ?" he answered, turning round with a laugh. "No, no ; the faggots and the San Benito ought to be *your* fate !"

"But joking apart, speaking quite seriously, you might make me your confidante. Do tell me all about her ?" I urged in a wheedling tone.

I could imagine that Maurice's experiences would be thrilling. He was extremely handsome. He was twenty-seven—eight years older than I—and it was inconceivable that he had not had, at least, *one* serious love-affair. "Come, Maurice, I'm waiting to offer my appreciative sympathy."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll have to wait some time," he answered with a provoking smile. "Do not think I am going to give you a right of way through my mind, and have all my most sacred secrets and tenderest reminiscences ridiculed and discussed by you and Mrs. Vane. No, no ! Certainly *not*."

"Well, I think you might tell me about her, considering that I am the nearest relation you have in the world," I urged with an aggrieved expression that had ever proved irresistible with Uncle Jim. But Maurice was evidently of sterner stuff than that wary old shikarry.

"*Her*," he echoed, leaning back against the pier, and surveying me with folded arms. "You womenkind always imagine that a man must have some kind of what you call a *her* in the background. Do you know that I have an inscription written on my heart ?" he added, suddenly dropping his voice and looking gravely into my expectant eyes.

An inscription on his heart ! Mary of England and Calais flashed into my brain ; how immensely interesting !

"Tell me what it is ? You may be sure I shall never repeat it," I exclaimed eagerly.

"You will never breathe it to mortal," he said, coming nearer to me. "On your word of honour?"

"Never," I answered most solemnly.

"It is," whispering mysteriously, "'Trespassers will be prosecuted.' Aha! Miss Nora," he said, as he watched my discomfited face; "one good turn deserves another; I took a rise out of *you*, that time."

Seeing that he was not inclined to give me his confidence, it suddenly struck me that I would do a really generous deed, and tell him *my* little secret.

"Would you like to hear about my love-affair, Maurice?" I asked gravely, and indeed with some natural embarrassment.

"Yours!" he echoed scoffingly; "come, come, we have had quite enough jokes for to-night; anyone but a born fool could see that you are as completely heart-whole as——" And being at a loss for some comparison, I heard him mutter, "As I am myself."

"Here are my syce and horse, and here is Mrs. Vane," he added, as Violet and Dicky Campbell strolled suddenly into view.

I fancy that the latter viewed my long *tête-à-tête* with Maurice with some disfavour, for as he and I followed the other couple up the avenue, he made some captious allusions to good-looking cousins, and old friends being shunted—in fact, he made himself exceedingly unpleasant. We loitered so long, arguing and quarrelling, that Maurice and his Arab passed us *en route* home; he was captain of the day, and in undress uniform, and nothing became him better than his blue patrol-jacket and gold-laced cap. I paused to wave him an adieu as he cantered by, and partly to aggravate Dicky, and partly to please myself, turned and looked back, and watched him galloping across the moonlit plain, till he was lost to sight.

Then I went into the house, closed the piano, folded up our pet chair-backs, and took leave of my aunt for the night.

"Why did you stay indoors all the evening, Vio?" I said to Mrs. Vane, between two yawns.

"To be candid with you, I had on a pair of new shoes, and, as one of them pressed me sore, I found sitting more agreeable under the circumstances. By-the-way, what a

long talk you and Maurice had this evening," she added, as we lighted our candles previous to retirement; "may I make bold to ask the topic of your discourse?"

"Most kindly welcome. We had *two* topics under discussion—hearts and love;" and I broke into song:

"Oh, there's nothing half so sweet in life  
As love's young dream!  
And next to that there's naught so nice  
As — strawberries and cream."

"Be quiet, Nora; you'll wake your uncle," said Mrs. Vane angrily. "So you were discussing love? a most congenial subject! with your cousin in the moonlight. Not at all so bad for a young lady who is a sworn enemy to flirtation. Seriously, Nora?"

"Seriously, Violet, your pretty little mouth was never intended for preaching"—kissing her—"and, seriously, I'm going to bed;" and, brandishing my candle with a gesture of farewell, I turned, and abruptly departed.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### I AM ADVISED TO LOCK THE STABLE DOOR.

J'ai eu toujours pour principe de ne faire jamais par autrui ce que je pouvais faire par moi-même.—*Montesquieu*.

EVERY mail for the last four months had brought me a letter from Major Percival ; a letter of at least three closely-written sheets. The first novelty of these effusions had now worn off, and I found them somewhat dry and monotonous. They were not in the least bit like love-letters ; I might have read them aloud to the whole cantonment with perfect impunity. Generally there was a long account of balls, dinners, and *fêtes*, and the immense attention my future lord and master received from high and low ; two pages would be devoted to the shortcomings of his new valet, two pages to an incipient cold, or touch of gout ; a long list of books I was to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, was not an unusual item. The delight of his relations at the prospect of his approaching marriage, and their entire approval of my photograph, were now and then alluded to. Also the immense crowds of pretty faces, upon which his eyes were constantly feasted ; it was gratifying to know that not one among the multitude could compare with mine. More than once Major Percival hinted that not a few of these pretty creatures were only waiting for the least *souppçon* of encouragement to smile on *him*. His last letter, just received, was lying in my lap, as I sat in our deep, cool, front veranda, early one beautiful morning. The concluding page will suffice as a specimen :

“I have been looking at landaus, in Long Acre, and seen several that I fancy ; but I have not made up my mind as yet about the lining. I wonder which will suit you best, sapphire blue or dark green ? By-the-way, I hope you are taking great care of your complexion, and not allowing the

sun to make acquaintance with your face, and hands, and pretty white throat? *A propos*—I am exceedingly uneasy about my *hair*. It is coming out in handfuls, and nothing will stop it. Your aunt has an excellent native recipe, which I should like to try. Remember me kindly to her and your uncle, and ever believe me, yours affectionately, H. PERCIVAL.—(P.S.—Do not forget the hair-wash.)”

I folded up this letter with a strange unaccountable feeling of dissatisfaction and discontent, and glanced down the veranda where all our party were assembled—auntie absorbed in her knitting, uncle in the Asian, Boysie Towers and his brother Boo-Boo deeply intent on building a castle of bricks, whilst Maurice (who was sitting on the steps) acted as confidential adviser and consulting architect, with Rosie on his knee. Rosie Towers, aged eight, a slender, rather pretty little girl, with neat black legs, short white frock, and *crêpe* yellow hair, adored Maurice, and made no secret of her devotion; and, strange to say, Maurice submitted to her endearments, and blandishments, with an excellent grace. I felt a wholly indefensible twinge of jealousy. In my youth, Maurice had never suffered *me* to sit on his knee, with my arm entwined round his neck, and my head on his shoulder; he never gave me rides on his pony, nor boxes of chocolate, nor a magnificent doll; but then I was never an alluring young person, of an affectionate disposition, like Rosie; in fact, quite the reverse, and I was distinctly plain.

“I am sure I don’t know on what grounds we should have the Towers nursery in this veranda—why not have the orphanage here at once?” exclaimed Mrs. Vane pettishly; suddenly uprooting herself from a deeply comfortable chair, and surveying Maurice and his young companions (and the litter they were making) with an air of marked disfavour. “Rosie, why do you tease Captain Beresford? You will throttle him before long; and you are really too big a girl to be nursed.”

“Oh, but I am so dreadfully comfortable,” rejoined Rosie, with a toss of her golden mane; “and besides, he does not mind, do you?” to Maurice in a cajoling voice.

“By-the-way,” I observed, walking down the veranda

with my letter in my pocket, "does anyone know of a good hair-wash?"

"Hair-wash!" echoed Mrs. Vane; "why, what do you want with one? Your hair is already below your knees."

"Not for myself," I answered; "but for a friend."

"Ah, yes! I can understand you. For an elderly friend," she rejoined, with a look of unspeakable significance.

"Jarvis has some stuff that he swears by," said Maurice, glancing up, brick in hand. "I can't say I've ever had occasion to try it myself; but he declares, that it would make the hair grow on an old bullock-trunk."

"Well, that certainly sounds promising. I shall take an early opportunity of looking at Mr. Jarvis's locks," said Mrs. Vane. "He is a singularly wooden-headed youth."

"He went to England the day before yesterday; so I am afraid you must postpone your inspection," replied Maurice gravely.

"To England again? Why, he is always on leave—sick certificate, urgent private affairs, every dodge."

"Well, you see, he looks upon Asia as a country to be avoided, and, as he has heaps of coin, perhaps he is right. Captain Robinson has come back; so the void is filled."

"I'm delighted to hear it. He brings me a parcel from his sister. How is he looking?"

"Oh, awfully fit."

"I thought *you* were talking of taking a run home this year?" said Mrs. Vane, puckering her eyebrows.

"So I was, but I have changed my mind," replied Maurice, setting down Rosie, and picking up his hat and whip; "I shall put it off till next year."

"One wants a lot of rupees for a trip home these times," said uncle reflectively; "you young fellows are so deucedly extravagant, and send your money flying in all directions."

"Bear in mind that *all* your friends will expect handsome presents," observed Mrs. Vane impressively; "really valuable jewellery, shawls, and Indian curiosities. That will be *one* little item; you cannot return empty-handed."

"But I shall," replied Maurice, with decision; "I assure you that the only curiosity I mean to take home is myself!"



"Who knows but you may take a wife as well?" said Mrs. Vane, with a smile.

"Who knows?" returned Maurice, reddening slightly. Then, suddenly looking at his watch, he exclaimed, "By Jove, I had no idea it was so late; I must be off. Here, syce," beckoning to his horse-keeper, "come on. Of course you are all coming to our sports this evening?" he proceeded, addressing everyone in general, but looking at me. "I'm one of the performers, but I'll keep you good places in the front row, where you will see the tent-pegging and the lemon-cutting to the greatest advantage. Good-bye;" and, with a wave of his hat, he galloped off, followed by Tuppence, *ventre à terre*.

"By-the-way, Pussy," said auntie, as she turned back into the veranda, "I think you had better tell your cousin of your engagement. You need not keep him in the dark; I am sure he will be delighted."

"I am not quite so certain of *that*," remarked Mrs. Vane pointedly; "but I quite agree with you, that he ought to be told at once."

"Shall I break it to him gently, Nora?" said auntie with a smile.

"No, do not," I replied eagerly; "I would much rather tell him myself. Leave it to me, please—all of you—will you promise?" looking anxiously round.

"Of course we will, my dear, if you wish it," said auntie, with suave acquiescence.

"Well, mind you *do* tell him—and *soon*," said Mrs. Vane emphatically; "or it will be a case of locking the stable door when the steed is stolen!"

"My dear Violet," exclaimed auntie in a shocked voice, "you don't know what you are saying. Maurice and Nora have been brought up together, and are just like brother and sister."

A little, incredulous sniff, not lost on *me*, was Mrs. Vane's only reply, as she turned away, and began picking petals off the lovely creeper that embowered the whole veranda.

"Oh, Pussy!" said uncle, suddenly raising his eyes above the paper. "Why could you not have waited a little longer? This cousin of yours is just a fellow after my own heart. Now, I could easily understand a girl falling in love

with *him*," he concluded with an emphasis by no means complimentary to Major Percival.

"James, James, you really must not say such things!" said auntie austerely. "You can hardly expect Nora to marry to please you in order to have two shikarries in the family."

"I think the old grandfather was not so far wrong after all," persisted uncle courageously. "And Nora might have done worse than become Mrs. Beresford of Gallow;" the latter part of his sentence was muttered to his Asian, but I heard it nevertheless, and was by no means as indignant or displeased as might have been expected!

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### ABOUT A TIGER AND A KISS.

All men have their price.

UNCLE'S shikarry, "Mari," was a very singular-looking old person. Your uneducated eye might fancy him to be in the last stage of emaciation and decrepitude; but he was nothing of the kind, he could gird up his loins and run for miles; he could sit up all night on the branch of a tree, marking down the gorged tiger; he was the most knowing of his profession, the best organiser of a beat in the Presidency, and the mutual and jealously-guarded, enormously-paid servant of uncle and Maurice. Tigers are rarer than they used to be in the good old days of John Company; a brace of tigers before breakfast is a now unheard-of bag! They are not to be found sporting in one's compound, or gambolling on the high-road as some people still imagine. Nevertheless, within forty miles of Mulkapore there prowled a "man-eater" who had never yet been brought to justice, though more than seventy people were said to have been his victims! With the very name of this notorious monster, native mothers subdued their naughty children to abject penitence and prompt obedience, and the rumour of his being in the neighbourhood immediately placed a village in a state of siege.

All the inhabitants shut themselves up in their little mud hovels till he took his departure; for he had been known to stalk through the streets more than once, and carry off the impatient or the unwary. He was a perfect scourge within a certain radius, killing and eating old women, children, grass-cutters, and, finally—emboldened by success—able-bodied men and women. He really seemed to be the embodiment of the "Evil One"—continually going about seeking whom he might devour. Shooting

parties for his benefit had been organised, over and over again, and without success. He evaded every effort to take him; he scorned the bait of a plump young buffalo. Nothing would entice him short of a solitary human being; and he travelled in too erratic a manner to fall an easy prey. Say that he had made a meal of a miserable herd-boy, close to some village, and the news being brought into the cantonments, all the noted shots would to horse and away, to beat that neighbourhood; but ere they had pitched their camp, fresh tidings would probably arrive—*i.e.*, that the tiger had killed a coolie woman in a district thirty miles off. Twice he had sprung upon and devoured the wretched Banghy postman, whose tinkling bells and sing-song chant, far from overawing, had simply attracted this terrible brute.

One evening, just before dinner, I came into the veranda, and found uncle and Maurice interviewing the shikarry—a little, withered, half-naked savage, with a dirty turban, a skinny brown body, and a fantastic belt, stuck full of flints, powder-flasks, and knives. What a contrast to Maurice, tall, upright, well-built, in irreproachable evening-dress and snowy linen, the *beau idéal* of an officer and gentleman. And yet this type of advanced civilisation was literally hanging on the words of the wizened, half-naked barbarian. So deep were their confidences, so rapt my cousin's attention, that he did not even notice *me*.

"Maurice," I said, as I stood in the doorway, "never mind that stupid old man, but come and help me to wind some silk."

"I will in a minute, Nora," he answered, without even turning his head. "Just hold on for one second."

I felt decidedly piqued. "The idea of ignoring me for the sake of that horrid old shikarry; of making me wait whilst he talked to him," I thought, as I sank into a chair with a gesture of resignation, and listened to their enthralling conversation. This is what Mari was saying, with hideous faces, and great gesticulation:

"True I telling you, sahib! Tiger done come Nazapett country again, killing Banghy postman same like as before, and nearly in same place, two mile this side village. People there plenty 'fraiding; gentlemen tying up buffalo no use, that tiger only taking native people."

"Dinner, dinner, dinner, good people," said auntie, coming briskly into the veranda, "here are Colonel Keith and Mr. Campbell, literally starving;" and in a lower and more impressive key, "Jim, *do* come in;" so Jim and Maurice were obliged to tear themselves away, and dismiss their retainer until a more convenient occasion.

I was in a bad humour that evening, I could not tell why. Why are we sometimes in bad tempers in spite of ourselves? I was determined to show Maurice that I was not to be treated *de haut en bas*, so I snubbed him every time he spoke to me, and gave all my smiles and my conversation to Dicky Campbell. Now Maurice did not care for Dicky; and certainly Richard was conceited. We could not quarrel with him for thinking his own regiment the brightest jewel in the service of the Crown; but it was hard to expect us to go with him in the opinion that Lieutenant Campbell was decidedly the showman of the battalion! Otherwise, Dicky was harmless; he had a kind heart; his overpowering conceit was but the incrustation of the precious metal within.

But Maurice did not think so. Maurice thought the metal brass, and declared that "there was a lot of cheap swagger" about my fellow-passenger in the *Corunna*. Dicky had a weakness for very pronounced collars and cuffs, for exquisite gloves, for a drawl and an eyeglass, and for *me*; I think it was this latter frailty that Maurice found it impossible to condone.

Great was the talk about tigers, beats, and kills; about the number of victims that had fallen to the man-eater, and the length of time he had baffled his enemies.

"I hear he is a huge brute, old and thin, and has lost half his teeth," said Colonel Keith, helping himself to salad.

"Just like all man-eaters; they only take to human beings when they are no longer active enough to catch deer and big game," replied uncle.

"If this horrid beast had lived in the Middle Ages he would soon have been got rid of," I remarked meditatively.

"As how?" inquired Maurice with a smile; "brought down by an arquebuse, or piuned by an arrow?"

"I don't know *how*, but he would not have been allowed to go marauding about, as he does now. Some fair

lady, hearing of the terrible havoc he was making, would have bidden her own true knight prick forth, and bring her in the skin, or never see her face again."

"Especially if she had another string to her bow, and wanted to get rid of him," asserted Mrs. Vane cheerfully.

"Either leave his own skin or bring the tiger's," added Colonel Keith. "A case of St. George and the Dragon, eh, Nora?"

"Or," cried Maurice, "like the amiable creature that flung her glove into the arena among a *mêlée* of wild-beasts, and told her own *preux chevalier* to go fetch——"

"I should have fetched it," said Dicky grandiloquently, "and then flung it in her face!"

"Oh! fie—fie!" said auntie, shaking her head.

I'm sure I don't know what possessed me to say it. I did not mean it. I regretted it the instant I had spoken. I merely wanted to say something disagreeable to Maurice, who had hitherto smiled invulnerable throughout the meal.

"The young men of to-day have not half the pluck they had in days of yore," I said superciliously, "if all tales are to be believed. I don't think there is a man in Mulkapore this moment who would go out single-handed and bring in the dead body of that man-eating tiger."

Dead silence. I felt that all eyes were on me. I glanced over at Maurice, who gravely met my gaze and said in an icy tone:

"I accept your challenge, Nora; figuratively speaking, I pick up the gauntlet."

"I did not mean it as a challenge," I faltered nervously, not a little frightened by the storm I had raised.

"Did you not? It certainly sounded like one" (very stiffly). "It behoves us to stir ourselves, Campbell, and show people that the young men of the present day are not the *fainéants* they are supposed to be."

"I assure you I only meant it as a joke, Maurice; really, only a joke," I exclaimed with a miserable attempt at a laugh; "and, of course, present company are always excepted."

"When you are pleased to make jokes of that kind, Nora, you should prepare us by saying previously, 'This is going to be a joke;' otherwise the point is missed; and I

am afraid I cannot accept your most flattering excuse," returned Maurice, with overwhelming politeness.

I hated him to speak to me like this. How stern he looked! He reminded me of the old days at Gallow. However, times were changed; I was not going to allow him to keep me in order now; so I replied with great dignity: "I would not be rude, Maurice, if I were you."

"That's right, Miss Neville," said Dicky approvingly. "Just walk into him. He can be very insulting sometimes, can't he, eh?"

Maurice took no notice whatever of my remark, or of Dicky's suggestion, and went on cracking walnuts for Mrs. Vane (who sat beside him) with the most unruffled composure. Evidently auntie felt that there was thunder in the air, and made an early move, and I escaped into the front veranda with eager haste.

I felt rather ashamed of myself as I sat on the steps with my elbows on my knees, staring at the stars, and listening to the croak-croak of the frogs in a neighbouring marsh. Never mind, I thought, I would make it all right with Maurice by-and-by. I had no business to say such things out of pure ill-temper, especially to him—to him of all people, when I remembered that Sunday at Gallow, and Beauty Connor. But I had no chance of making amends; Maurice's dog-cart came round in a few minutes (hours before its usual time), and I heard him go into the drawing-room, and say good-night, offer a seat to Dicky, and drive away, without even a message for me! About twelve o'clock next morning, uncle came home in a state of the liveliest excitement; before the door of his office-brougham could be opened, he called out:

"Did you hear of it, missus? Did you think he was such a young idiot?" Then, stepping hastily out: "Could you have believed that he was such an infernally foolhardy fellow?"

"Who do you mean?" we cried in a breath.

"Who should I mean?" sitting heavily down, and casting his topee on the ground with great violence.

"Beresford? He went off to Nazapett last night; found the Colonel at mess; got three days' leave, and, two hours later, he and that fool Mari had started alone. Madness! I hear he is not going to have any beaters or fire-

works. Nothing!"—opening his hands expansively—"but means to bring the brute down on foot. Just the way poor Renny met his death three years ago."

For some seconds no one spoke; and then auntie, turning to where I stood, as if turned into stone, said very sternly:

"Nora, this is *your* doing."

That was a day I shall never forget! a day of agonised suspense and self-reproach; and the next was another of long-drawn leaden uncertainty, but evening brought us great news—intelligence that went round Mulkapore like wildfire—"Captain Beresford had killed the man-eater."

He had assumed the Banghy postman's bells, patrolled the fatal locality, and brought down the terror of the country. The news had been sent in by a coolie, who was almost hysterical with joy. He said that the entire district was up *en masse*, and were with difficulty restrained from doing pousse—worshipping Maurice. A day later the hero of the hour galloped in with the skin of the tiger strapped before him on the saddle.

Great was the enthusiasm of our whole community. Auntie looked as if she would have liked to hug him; uncle was in a state of rampant exultation, and I felt rather uncomfortable; more uncomfortable still when Maurice, having dismounted and returned our greetings, unrolled the trophy, and laid it triumphantly at my feet.

"It is for you, Nora," he said, standing hat in hand.

"But I won't have it!" I cried. "That horrid animal you risked your life to kill, and that has eaten seventy people!"

"Come, come, Nora, don't be ungracious," said auntie; "you should be very proud of the honour."

"So I am, and of course I'll take it; but it seems to have—cost so much," I stammered, struggling to repress my tears.

"It's not much of a skin," said Maurice, turning it over with his foot, "but a man-eater has always a bad coat. However, he will never trouble the country any more—that's one blessing."

By this time, crowds of our retainers had assembled to see the great sight, and all passers-by were streaming up the avenue on the same errand. So uncle, taking Maurice



proudly by the arm, led him within (in spite of his remonstrances, and apologies for his rough shikar suit), and we all followed him into the dining-room, and sat round and gazed at our hero with all our eyes whilst he made a most excellent breakfast.

"A forty-mile ride early in the morning gives one no end of an appetite, Mrs. Neville," he said apologetically. "I hope you won't be shocked at the awful ravages I have made in your excellent pie."

"Go on. Now, if you have finished," said uncle impatiently, "tell us all about it; begin at the beginning," tapping the ground with his foot.

"Oh, there's not much to tell," said Maurice modestly. "I got my leave all right, the night I was here, and reached Nazapett by seven the next morning, and found the village in a state of the most abject fear. No one had stirred since the catastrophe. Mari and I had something to eat, and then went out, and prospected the place where the post had usually been taken. We picked up the bag, letters and all complete, from where it was lying in the middle of the road, near to a pool of blood; and there was a ghastly track through the tall grass, where apparently the body had been dragged away."

"Spare us these details, *please*," said auntie, looking rather white, and shuddering visibly.

"And what was the country like?" inquired uncle, judicially; "jungle, or nullahs, or hills, or what?"

"Very hilly," returned Maurice; "high conical hills, densely wooded, and a low scrub jungle at either side of the road."

"A nasty place! And how far from the village?" asked uncle.

"About two miles—the fatal spot was in a valley about half a mile in length—with dense jungle on either side. Within this space, *three* Banghy postmen had met a violent end!"

"Well, go on; what did you do, man?" said uncle imperatively.

"We went some way into the jungle, and found the postman's turban, and—but never mind"—correcting himself—"we picked up the bag and bells, and returned, had a wash, and a meal, and a sleep; and about eleven o'clock I

started out alone, in spite of Mari, who besought me with prayers and tears to 'tie up and to beat.' I slung the Banghy bells to my rifle, and made for the dreaded spot; the villagers looking upon me with gloomy commiseration, as a would-be and determined suicide. It was a splendid moonlight night, bright as day and still as death. For nearly two hours I patrolled the deadly mile at a long slinging run, loudly ringing my bells in vain. At last I began to think it was of no use, and that I might as well turn in, when I heard a sudden crash through the bushes to my left, and an enormous tiger slowly stalked out into the road—about twenty yards ahead of me—uttering low growls."

"I should have shrieked and fainted," interpolated Mrs. Vane.

"Hush!" said uncle excitedly. "Go on, Maurice. What next? what next?"

"Well, he stood surveying me for nearly a minute, lashing the ground with his tail, evidently thinking, '*Another Banghy-wallah come to be devoured!*' As I saw him crouch, to make the spring, I fired both barrels, and had the luck to hit him right between the eyes. He made one wild convulsive bound, a kind of gurgling snarl, and rolled over and over, literally biting the dust. Another minute, and he was dead. I went up and made sure and certain, and then set off to Nazapett at the double. At first the population fancied that I was fleeing for my life; but I soon undeceived them. They could not, however, believe the news at first, it was too good to be true. At last, emboldened by Mari's valiant example, they timidly stole out, and lo, when, a great way off, they descried the body of their enemy lying dead in the middle of the white, moonlit road, their joy knew no bounds. They nearly tore me to pieces; they went down on their knees before me, and wept, and laughed, like so many lunatics.

"When the first mad moments were over, they turned to the tiger, who lay stretched out like a huge striped cat, and spat at him, cursed him, and denounced him with howls of oriental vituperation; to which, as you know, Billingsgate is but delicate pleasantry. He was then tied to a bamboo, and borne off by twelve stout coolies; the crowd accompanying him with tomtoms, and yells of defiance and

derision. The remainder of the night was given up to incessant tomtoming, feasting, and singing. Sleep was the last thing to be thought of, so I resigned myself to my fate, and sat in great state, beside the headman of the village, to be seen and admired. I consumed no less than six cheroots, and returned thanks for many magnificent speeches, in my best Hindostani, with a slight touch of Tamil and Telugu. Early this morning I was wreathed in flowers; ditto "Desertborn," who bore his honours most ungraciously, and would allow no interference with his tail. It was really all I could do, nobly backed by Mari, to get leave to depart; the innocent villagers could hardly be persuaded that I was not one of their gods, a deliverer sent from heaven, in the shape of a Feringee soldier. However, at last I got away, and," concluding lamely, "here I am."

Next afternoon, when Maurice and I were alone in the garden, I made a kind of excuse for my speech at the dinner-table. He received my apologies very readily, saying with a laugh: "I suppose you think that because we don't go about playing on guitars, and breaking each other's bones, we are a miserably degenerate lot, and that the spirit of chivalry is dead. But you are labouring under a delusion, my pretty cousin—a man can *still* make his lady-love

"Glorious by his sword,  
And famous by his pen."

But I was *not* Maurice's lady-love, and never could be, I thought with a blush, and I had no right to accept his fame and glory.

We had been playing tennis, and I was now sitting on the low wall that divided our compound from Colonel Fox's, and under the shade of an enormous tamarind-tree, whose broad trunk afforded an admirable resting-place for my back.

"Look here, Nora," said Maurice suddenly; "I obeyed your behest, and fulfilled my *devoir* as it was called; and now I want to know what guerdon you are going to give me. By rights you ought to offer it—it ill becomes me to remind you, but my delicate innuendoes have all been of no avail."

"A wreath of laurel, of course," I cried with animation; "you shall have a wreath at *once*, if you will promise to wear it."

"I had quite enough of that kind of thing at Nazapett—about twenty monster wreaths swathed round my neck. I was half choked. No, no, think of something else!" beseechingly.

"I'm thinking as hard as ever I can," I replied, chipping off bits of mortar with my tennis-bat. "You have studs, chains, a locket, pins."

"I don't want anything of that kind," interrupted Maurice hastily.

"Shall I work you something with my own fair fingers?" I asked with a smile.

"You *have* given me a smoking-cap," he remarked ungratefully.

"Then just mention what you would like, and you shall have it," I exclaimed ironically.

"Can't you guess what I would like?" he replied, slowly swinging his tennis-bat to and fro, and looking at me very hard.

"No," I replied, with innocent thoughtfulness, "but I will give you this," laying down my bat, and unfastening a little gold anchor from my bunch of charms, and holding it out on the palm of my hand.

"'Hope on, hope ever'—a most significant token; thank you very much, Nora," said Maurice slowly. "Anything else?"

"I declare you are the most grasping person I ever met! I endow you with a very pretty little gift—one of my pet charms—and still, like the daughter of the horse-leech, you cry, 'Give! give!' Here, you may have this rose into the bargain," tossing him a lovely, half-opened, crimson bud, taken from the front of my dress. "Now, I hope you are satisfied?" I asked imperiously.

"I suppose I must be!" he replied discontentedly. He was standing beside me, twirling the despised rose between his fingers. "You may as well put it in for me," holding out the lappet of his coat.

To this I assented, having searched for a pin, and descended to *terra firma*.

"I can see that you are not satisfied yet," I said, surveying my cousin critically as I pinned in the flower. "What did you wish for—honestly—tell me what you *would* like?"

"I would like," replied Maurice, with a sudden odd inflection in his voice, "something far rarer, and a million times sweeter than this rose," touching it. "Now, perhaps, you can guess what I mean?" looking at me with expectant eyes.

"No, I can't; that is to say"—instantly outrivalling the reddest of red roses. "If you mean what I think you mean, I mean to say——" stammering pitiaibly.

"If you mean what I think you mean," echoed a gay voice; and just behind us stood Mrs. Vane, who had silently strolled across the grass with a white parasol over her head. "What do you *both* mean by not coming to tea? I have been sent to know what had become of you. Come along," putting her arm affectionately within mine. "Come along, Captain Beresford; you must not neglect your afternoon tea like this; you said the other day that it softened the manners. Now," having taken us both in tow, "now I insist on hearing the whole of your recent conversation. One of my ears is burning like a coal, and I am convinced that you have been discussing *me*."

## CHAPTER XXX.

### PECCAVI.

Too late I stayed—forgive the crime—  
Unheeded flew the hours.  
How noiseless falls the foot of Time,  
That only treads on flowers !

I AM afraid that when people come to the end of this chapter they will also arrive at the conclusion that I was “a terrible young girl,” as Sweetlips used to call me ; and, indeed, no one can have a worse opinion of my shameful silence than I subsequently had myself.

Maurice and I became excellent friends, as you have seen ; and if with friendship we had been content, these confessions need never have been made. A steady, sensible, brotherly and sisterly regard is an admirable thing ; but is such friendship possible between a handsome young Artillery officer and (though I speak of myself) a pretty girl, who have many tastes and ideas in common, and who are thrown into each other’s intimate society day after day and week after week ?

Maurice was my partner for three waltzes at every dance we went to. At tennis we generally played together, and somehow I never was so successful as when he was on my side. He was my constant escort when I rode of an evening, and never failed to join us every Thursday morning—the garrison holiday. Uncle had given me a new horse—a young chestnut waler, called “Cavalier,” and Mrs. Vane had entirely appropriated “Methusalem” for her own exclusive use. She, uncle, and I were frequently joined by Maurice and Dicky Campbell, and the latter usually rode at my bridle-rein, for Cavalier was half-broken, and as hot-tempered and impulsive as any of his namesakes, and liable to frantic fits of alarm at the burly elephants we

sometimes met, or the long strings of camels stealing silently past. I shall never forget those lovely Indian mornings!—the fresh crisp air still retaining the coolness of daybreak, the heavy dew sparkling on the grass, and the slowly rising sun gradually gilding tree and mosque and far-stretching plains.

Passing through early-rising villages, we beheld groups of picturesque women, surrounding that centre of attraction, the well, clad in bright yellow garments, confined round the waist with broad massive silver belts, their hair ornamented or padded out with fragrant white blossoms from the neighbouring cork-trees. Inside little brown houses, the sound of grinding corn for the family use might be heard, accompanied by cheerful chanting. Drove of pack-bullocks would be passed, driven by their sturdy, long-legged owner, singing as he went a wild monotonous song. Away from the cantonments and villages, out into the clear open country, what gallops we had, Maurice and I being the two best mounted and the most enthusiastic, led the van, sometimes putting up a fox or a jackal, to which Tuppence gave long, praiseworthy, but wholly unavailing chase.

Maurice's one extravagance was horseflesh. He owned, to my knowledge, three capital chargers, a dog-cart horse, and a couple of polo ponies. Mounted on his black Arab, "Desertborn"—no contemptible handful—as he cantered beside me on his hard-mouthed but light-footed steed, he looked the very *beau idéal* of a graceful finished horseman. A Terai hat, a kind of gray felt sombrero encircled by a dark blue and gold puggaree, cast a romantic, not to say becoming shadow over his face, and his much too eloquent dark gray eyes.

If Major Percival could only ride like Maurice! But the wildest flight of imagination failed to realise Major Percival on horseback at all, much less bestriding Maurice's fiery black Arab; and I smiled to myself a wicked smile as I pictured his face, his gestures, and his ultimate destination, during some of those mad wild plunges that Maurice appeared to enjoy. He often said that he preferred to keep a horse no one could ride but himself, and he would not give a groat for any dog that would look at—much less follow, or care for—anyone but his special proper master. These trivial remarks gave me little glimpses of Maurice's

character. If he demanded such absolute devotion from his dumb animals, what would he not ask from——

However, it was no concern of mine. Maurice could no doubt be jealous, very jealous, but his jealousy would never affect me. During these *tête-à-tête* rides we became excellent friends, and my cousin's mind was wholly disabused of the passing impression it had received from the gate-top that moonlight evening. We talked of Gallow, the draining of the lower meadows, the new roof, the new cottages—improvements that would absorb the best part of Maurice's income for the next three or four years. Nothing was done without my approval; not a gate put up, nor a tree cut down. "You know so much more about the place than I do," Maurice would say humbly, as he confided his troubles and his business correspondence to my inexperienced ear. Gallow was heavily mortgaged, too, and in no way an unalloyed bequest.

"You would not sell it, I suppose?" I profanely asked; "it is not much good to you. You will never live there."

"Sell it? Never! What are you thinking of, Nora? Sell Gallow, which has been in our family since the flood? Sell the banshee, that gambols on the roof? The whole contents of the burying-ground would rise at the mere thought. No, no! I am not quite such a Goth as you imagine. To begin with, I could not sell it, it is entailed property, and, to conclude, I have more family pride than you seem to imagine."

"But you will never live there," I again urged. "You must hate the place. Your recollections of it cannot be very pleasant. By-the-way, I hope you attach no special importance to first impressions. Shall you ever forget the day you picked me out of the mud?"

"No," he returned emphatically. "What an object you were, to be sure! No one can ever accuse me of falling in love with you at first sight, can they?"

"I should rather think not!" "Nor at any other," I was about to add, but suddenly arrested my too ready tongue, and asked instead: "How many times did you come to Gallow—three times, was it not?"

"Yes; my first visit was made memorable by your practical jokes. My second was devoted to hunting; and



my third"—a pause—"my third was the luckiest visit I ever paid in my life."

This speech was made with deliberate intention ; it was the first time Maurice had even distantly hinted at the old bond between us.

"Your third visit to Gallow was altogether hateful and detestable," I answered vehemently, avoiding his eyes, and looking straight between my horse's ears ; "and we will never speak of it again, if *you* please." I gave no time for an answer purposely, but administering a sharp cut of my whip to the much amazed Cavalier, was soon alongside of uncle and Mrs. Vane, whose company effectually excluded any more youthful reminiscences on the part of my companion.

But Maurice found other topics more welcome to me, as we walked our horses homewards under the shade of the wide-spreading fig-trees that fringed our high roads. He told me of his years spent in India, and described people and places with a wit and freshness that interested and delighted me. Nothing fired my imagination more than a description he gave me of a shooting trip in Bundelcund, a wild, little-known tract near Central India, where glades of green park-like land were studded with magnificent trees ; where lakes were half covered with sheets of unsuspecting duck, teal, geese, and wild-fowl of all descriptions ; where the red flamingo drilled his battalions undisturbed ; the peacock proudly paced his sylvan solitude, monarch of all he surveyed ; where tanks and pools were concealed beneath a network of exquisite pink-tinted lotus-flowers, and black buck and deer abounded, sauntering hither and thither in leisurely and graceful groups. But where Maurice became really eloquent was when he spoke of big game—of the watchings, the waitings, the beats—and of the bag of twenty-five fine tigers which rewarded the unflagging exertions of two whole hot months.

Was it because Maurice was my escort that these mornings, these Thursday mornings, seemed to me heaven-sent, the happiest of my whole existence ? I dared not ask myself the question ; when it forced itself to my notice, I instantly thrust it angrily aside.

Maurice was my cousin, the friend of my early days (I did not think so then), my nearest relative in the world after auntie. He rode capitally—he was a delightful com-

panion. As to Major Percival, if he could not ride he could do other things, "and we all know," remonstrating eagerly with my too tiresome conscience, "that comparisons are odious."

Day after day went by; flew by, it seemed to me; and I had never yet made my little speech to Matrice; the longer I postponed it the more difficult I found it to make the avowal. He had given me his entire confidence; I knew all about his doings for the last five years, and, indeed, with Mrs. Vane to jog his memory, he had no chance of forgetting much. There were no love-passages in his past, absolutely none; and "I am too old to fall in love now," he rashly boasted to me at an early stage of our friendship. "According to your friend, Mrs. Roper, you take the malady when you are quite young, and surely I am out of danger—eight-and-twenty next August!"

"Don't shout till you are out of the wood," returned Mrs. Vane with a laugh. "Look at George."

(Now George was her husband, who had fallen madly in love with her, if report was to be believed, when he had attained the ripe age of fifty.) Shooting, fighting, playing polo—which with him amounted to a passion—were the events that Maurice chiefly dwelt on when he summed up his past career. Poor fellow! he firmly believed that he was as intimate with all the episodes of my lazy young life as I was myself. Alas, again I say, Poor Maurice!

It was the height of the Mulkapore season, and, as we rolled homeward in the open carriage, those white moonlight nights, from balls and dinner-parties, I, sitting with my back to the horses, feigned abstraction or fatigue, as I gazed over the moon-flooded plain—was I thinking of Major Percival, do you imagine? No, indeed, I was not; every corner, every chink, every crevice of my mind had Maurice for its tenant. I was mentally reviewing every word, weighing every glance, and spending the evening over and over again in imagination. Whilst I danced and enjoyed myself I could not refrain from watching Maurice, and taking a cousinly interest in himself and his partners; and I found, after a time, that it gave me a very novel and curiously disagreeable sensation to see him laughing and talking to other girls, exactly as he did with me; to see him sitting out dances with pretty companions, his brown head bent low in

confidential conversation, and his arm assiduously wielding a fan. I would look away as if I had been stung, and angrily ask myself, as I floated round the room to the strains of an excellent string band: "Could it be possible that I was envious of my cousin's attentions to other girls? Was I so wicked as to be jealous of Maurice?" Absurd! for we all know that jealousy is akin to *love*.

By degrees the *bonhomie* of Maurice's manner disappeared; his cavalier, cousinly criticisms remained unspoken, and were replaced by a reserved deferential demeanour, a slight and subtle change that I told myself I was at a loss to understand. But in truth, and in my heart of hearts, I had a glimmering of the reason, a faint, intangible, but none the less certain conviction *that Maurice loved me*. I had seen the same symptoms in others, and in former instances I had been partly vexed, partly flattered, and wholly indifferent. Query, was I vexed, was I indifferent now? I tried to blind my eyes, to silence my conscience, to tell myself that we only cared for each other as cousins. Why, then, did the sight of Maurice's horse in the distance, much less Maurice himself, bring a flutter to my heart, a flame to my cheek? I postponed—weakly and wickedly postponed—telling Maurice of my engagement. Every night I said to myself, "I will certainly tell him to-morrow;" and when to-morrow came it was still to-morrow. I pretended that opportunities for making the announcement were lacking, that when I had screwed my courage to the sticking-point some interruption invariably occurred. That after all it did not greatly signify when I told him; full well I knew the difference between us the great change my news would make. "You ought to tell, you must tell, you shall tell him," clamoured conscience; but in the end I am truly ashamed to confess that it was not conscience, but Mrs. Vane, that forced the truth from my reluctant lips.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### COLONEL KEITH'S LITTLE TEA.

With every minute you do change your mind,  
And call him noble that was once your hate.  
*Coriolanus.*

"WHAT wicked extravagance, Nora! Your new habit for a jungle ride! You are taking it quite into every-day use! I declare it is well for you that you are going to marry a rich man." Such was Mrs. Vane's friendly expostulation as she and I awaited our horses one afternoon in the porch. "There's no one coming excepting Dicky and Ellen," she added reassuringly; "do run and change it."

I could not reasonably explain to her that Maurice had more than once informed me that nothing I possessed suited me a quarter as well as my dark blue habit, and that I was wearing it to look my best in his eyes—I did not admit this to myself, much less, need I say, to my companion. No; I mendaciously assured her "that number two was really so shabby that it was scarcely decent, and would soon make a grand scarecrow."

"Shabby!" she echoed. "I'll trouble you for mine," holding out a very threadbare elbow and pointing to a large patch on the skirt; "but it's quite good enough for scrambling about among the ruins." Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, she turned sharply round and added suspiciously: "Captain Beresford is not coming, is he?"

"I believe he is; he said something about it," I answered carelessly, without raising my eyes, and continuing to draw a pattern in the sand with my riding-cane with increasing zeal and finish.

"Now I understand why we have put on our best habit. Why did we not say so at once?" she demanded sarcastically. "And what are you blushing about, eh?"

Take care, Nora.

"We sighed, we grieved, we wept, we never *blushed* before," she quoted impressively.

"Who never blushed before? and who is blushing now?" inquired a well-known voice, and Maurice, who had ridden up unnoticed on the sandy avenue, joined us.

"Oh, Nora, of course!"

"Never mind, Nora, you need not be ashamed. Darwin declares a blush to be the most human of all emotions. Who ever saw a dog, a cat, or a monkey blush? Your blushes proclaim that you belong to the most superior order of humanity. I am only sorry that I cannot keep you in countenance."

"Nevertheless I have seen you acquit yourself nobly," observed Mrs. Vane condescendingly.

"As for instance——?" he inquired with an incredulous smile.

"As, for instance, at that dinner-party at the Dwyers', when conversation, from a loud buzz, suddenly subsided to a dead silence, and a certain young lady was heard saying: 'You are exactly *my* style, Captain Beresford; I adore the Artillery!'"

"Come, Mrs. Vane, that is a very, very old story. Your memory is too good. Well, what about this ride to the city? We ought to make a start soon. Who is coming?"

"Colonel Neville, Nora, Dicky Campbell, Ellen Fox, you and I, and Boysie Towers," returned Mrs. Vane, counting on her fingers.

"Boysie Towers!" he echoed in a tone of amazed disapprobation.

"Yes; Colonel Keith said he might come, and you know it is *his* party; he is to drive down to the ruins, and have tea awaiting us in some picturesque locality, and we can ride home by moonlight."

At this instant we were joined by uncle, Ellen, and Dicky; and, just as we started, Boysie, on his long-suffering, skewbald Mahratta, came tearing into the compound.

Our ride to the ruined city was absolutely uneventful. I rode with Dicky; he was nearly always my escort of late, thanks to Mrs. Vane. By some mysterious but efficacious manœuvre, she invariably appropriated Maurice. If he and

I ever found ourselves alone she immediately joined us ; it was the same at the piano ; the same at our rides, our walks ; firmly, but with graceful politeness, she thrust herself into all our *tête-à-tête*. I could not reasonably complain—why should she not ?

About seven miles from Mulkapore, in the middle of a vast undulating plain, are the remains of an ancient, long-deserted city ; the walls, now partly overgrown with moss and grass, cover an area of no less than five miles in circumference ; the deep moat is pasture for herds of spotted deer and black buck, and so is the whole interior, save where here and there ruins resembling mosques, tombs, barracks, and aqueducts, have not yet crumbled to the ground, and still stand erect, gray, decrepit, and moss-grown. No records did this ruined city leave. If it ever possessed fame, it is entirely forgotten ; it is so absolutely unknown, so completely dead to the world, that it is now nameless. Near one of the old entrances we found Colonel Keith's gharry, and the "Gander," unharnessed and grazing, as became his name. We rode inside the wide enclosure, which really differed but slightly from the surrounding plains, and piloted by our syces, made for the sequestered spot where we were to have tea. Colonel Keith had selected the interior of a massive-looking tower, which commanded a fine view, but had to be scaled in a manner that would have taxed the energies of any ordinary goat. Nevertheless, our host was established when we arrived, and gave us a loud and hearty welcome, as we successively scrambled to his feet. Tea was ready ; in a remote corner the kettle was boiling, on a table-cloth were spread various dainty comestibles, on which I saw Boysie already feasting his appreciative eye. We were soon seated round the tea-maker (Mrs. Vane), doing ample justice to the refreshments set before us, especially Boysie, whose voracity on these occasions was a matter of well-deserved notoriety.

It was a lovely afternoon ; a little balmy breeze barely made itself felt, as we reclined in a variety of luxurious attitudes around the tablecloth. Mrs. Vane sat at the head, with Maurice on one side of her and uncle on the other ; I came next to uncle, Dicky Campbell next to me. Maurice was favoured with the immediate society of Boysie ; and Colonel Keith, too stout to recline on one elbow, like the

rest of the company, or to sit tailor-fashion, had found a nice large flat stone, upon which he sat enthroned at the head of the feast.

Beneath us lay the plain—upon which long, long shadows commenced to stretch themselves—the nondescript nameless ruins, and herds of half tame black buck, who were leisurely sauntering about in blissful ignorance of our neighbourhood.

“This tea has only just been introduced to the hot water, good people,” said Mrs. Vane, “so you must all bide a wee and exercise your patience.”

“I’m sure this old city must be a jolly place for ghosts,” remarked Dicky with startling abruptness.

“And snakes,” added Maurice impressively.

“Snakes there may be,” I answered, coiling my habit tightly round me, and glancing apprehensively at a neighbouring pile of stones, “but ghosts I don’t believe in; there are no ghosts in India.”

“There you are mistaken, my dear young lady,” replied Colonel Keith blandly; “India is the original headquarters, the family abode of ghosts; those in Europe are only colonists. Why, we could give you twenty well-authenticated stories out here for one you would hear at home.”

“Twenty ghost stories!” cried Boysie eagerly, pausing in the act of buttering a piece of seed cake; “oh, do tell us *one*.”

“Oh yes, do,” echoed Mrs. Vane; “it is broad daylight, and we all can sit close together, and I,” looking confidently behind her, “have a wall at my back.”

“Commence, commence without further delay. ‘Once upon a time,’” we clamoured.

“But you are all rank unbelievers,” objected Colonel Keith, with superb commiseration.

“Never mind that; who knows but you may have the glory of converting us,” replied Maurice encouragingly, turning round on his elbow, and preparing to give our host his undivided attention.

“I want no converts; seeing is believing, and I have no time for a long-winded tale. However, I’ll just give you a few ideas for your imaginations to work upon, if you like.”

"Ahem! attention. Are you all ready?" said Maurice, glancing round.

"Well," resumed Colonel Keith, having lit a cheroot, "what I am going to tell you is not fiction, but a *fact*," looking at Mrs. Vane with an impressive nod.

"There is a house in Cheetapore—a large two-storeyed, slate-coloured bungalow, standing in the middle of a mango-tope, and once most popular; but now empty, and universally shunned. It is haunted by a very extraordinary thing—a man's head. This head is that of a native, and wears a large green turban, and is to be seen, only too constantly, peeping through doorways, jumping about the floor, looking over your shoulder when you are shaving at the glass, and always disappearing and vanishing in a most surprising and unlooked-for manner. It has frightened nervous ladies by the score, and many strong, able-bodied men have seen and objected to it. Sometimes it gaily rolls downstairs before you; sometimes it peeps in at a window; sometimes it grins; sometimes it makes the most truly diabolical faces. Its mood is variable; only one thing about it is certain—its unfailing appearance after nightfall."

"Ugh, how horrid!" ejaculated Boysie.

"How are you feeling now, Mrs. Vane?" inquired Maurice cheerfully. "Don't you think you would be a very desirable tenant for the slate-coloured bungalow?"

"Not for the gold of Ophir," she answered with a shudder.

"I have heard of a somewhat similar story," said uncle sociably; "the only difference was, that my house was haunted by a hand—a small, white, woman's hand—that became a downright nuisance. It beckoned at doors, it tapped at windows, it leant unexpectedly on your shoulders, and it awoke you by passing its icy-cold fingers across your face."

"Don't! You are giving me a series of cold thrills!" cried Mrs. Vane; "do change the subject, let us talk of something more cheerful. I do not know which was worst, the head or the hand."

"I think I should prefer a whole ghost, not piecemeal apparitions," said Maurice, "what do you say, Mr. Tuppen?"—to Tuppen, who now thrust his ugly, intelligent head over his master's shoulder.

"Now, Captain Beresford, it's your turn; tell us some



nice, amusing anecdote, that will drive away these hideous recollections," said Mrs. Vane; "come, we are not going to let you off. Commence."

"Well, I'll tell you a story Tuppence told me, about a friend of his—about a very nice person—a little rough-haired terrier, and he begs me to impress upon you," dragging Tuppence to the front and making him sit on his haunches, "that this is a true story," glancing mischievously at Colonel Keith, "not fiction, but a *fact*. Attention! Mr. Tuppence's story, as translated and brought down to human intelligence by his master.

"Once upon a time a certain little dog, called Jock, was travelling to Bombay in the same carriage as his master, and at one of the intermediate stations, a day's rail from their destination, master and dog descended for refreshment; and, by some extraordinary misfortune, the train went off with the master and left the dog behind. He has since confessed that he was inveigled from the platform by a long-legged refreshment-room cat, with whom he wished to have a few words—but be that as it may, Jock was left on the platform, a stray dog. Thanks to his personal appearance, a railway peon took possession of him, and carried, or rather led, him by his all-useful red handkerchief to his home in a village two miles away, where Jock became the prey and the sport of a large unmannerly family of young peons, and lived as best he could on rice and ghee, keeping himself entirely to himself, and repudiating the advances of various mangy village pariahs, with an all-withering and blighting scorn. Every day at two o'clock (the hour when this train came in) did he travel down to the railway, and await his master on the platform. You might set your watch by that little red dog; to the very second he was to be seen travelling along the dusty white road, and arriving punctually to a minute; for months his trouble was unrewarded. Nearly a year elapsed, still he persevered, through monsoon torrents, through scorching heat. At last, one day—oh joy!—his master descended from the train. Simultaneous and affecting was the recognition. Many were the exclamations of the man, the transports of the dog, who, needless to say, got into the first-class carriage with all speed, and was borne away for ever from the peon's disconsolate family. The end!"

"Hurrah! well done! well done indeed, Mr. Tuppence!" And we all laughed and clapped and applauded; Tuppence making his acknowledgments by vociferous barking and running wild circles round the tablecloth.

"But seriously, Maurice, that is not a true story?" I inquired incredulously.

"As true as gospel! I myself have seen the dog coming down to the train, waiting for it, and going away bitterly disappointed, poor brute!"

"Well, Boysie, what do you think of that tale?" inquired Colonel Keith. An approving nod was his only reply. "By-the-way, young man, you are to be one of the most important people at Miss Gill's wedding next week. You are to be the page, I hear." Boysie again assented with a nod, as his mouth was otherwise engaged.

"I hope they have ordered an extra large cake," muttered Maurice.

"How do you like the notion, Boysie?" continued Colonel Keith.

"Oh, well enough," he returned with a would-be bashful simper. "I've been reading over the marriage service."

"Indeed! A youth of an inquiring mind! Nothing like taking time by the forelock."

"I suppose you are thinking of getting married yourself—eh, Boysie?" said Maurice, looking greatly diverted.

"No, I'm not," retorted Boysie peevishly; "but I just wanted to see if I had anything to say."

"You!" with contemptuous amazement.

"Well, I haven't," he continued complacently; but, turning with sudden animation to Mrs. Vane, and poking her with his stick, "tell me, Mrs. Vane, what does M. or N. mean?"

"Why don't you ask *me*, Boysie?" interrupted my cousin.

"Because you've never been married," he replied scornfully.

"Mrs. Vane, Mrs. Vane, do you hear me? What does M. or N. mean?" reiterated Boysie impatiently, and again applying his cane.

"Oh, it stands for their Christian-names, you horrid, rude little wretch—Mary and Nehemiah, Maria and Nicholas—anything you like."

"Oh, I see ; or, or," with a cunning look over at me, "or Maurice and Nora."

"You are getting quite smart, my young friend," said Maurice, rewarding him with a huge piece of cake, and surveying the imp with benignant toleration. Naturally I became *couleur de rose*, and Mrs. Vane looked not only uneasy but seriously annoyed, and said very sharply :

"Captain Beresford, I really wonder at you ! You will make the boy quite ill. His death will lie at your door ; it will indeed."

"Talking of ghosts," interrupted uncle, who had been lighting his cheroot at our kitchen-fire, "there's an old mosque here, untenable after nightfall ; they say a lot of people were massacred in it, and that, after dark, cries and groans and all kinds of horrible noises are heard in its neighbourhood."

"Suppose we go and see it," I said, starting up with alacrity ; "we shall certainly get the cramp if we stay here much longer. Let us adjourn."

My suggestion was most favourably entertained, and soon we had all descended and were following a narrow beaten footpath that led in the desired direction. I walked beside Ellen, Dicky with Maurice, and Colonel Keith had annexed himself to Mrs. Vane, and was pouring a series of blood-curdling ghost-stories into her reluctant ear. It was almost dusk when we reached the mosque ; the lady moon had not showed any symptoms of rising ; the place looked dark and uninviting, and Maurice, Boysie, and I were the only volunteers prepared to venture in. Mrs. Vane hastily endeavoured to dissuade me. "Nothing to be seen ; keep with me ; don't go breaking up the party," she whispered eagerly.

"I'll not be a minute," was my answer—"not two seconds," as, urged by curiosity, I followed my pioneers. The interior of the building was decidedly gloomy, and the outer portion was evidently the night stable of some cattle, as straw and fodder were strewn about. Truly there was not much to be seen ; we explored farther, and found another building and a deep, black cavity (presumably a well) down which Boysie and Maurice flung numerous stones, for the childish pleasure of hearing them reach the bottom. At last there was nothing further to detain us,

and we returned to the entrance, and found, to our amazement, that all the others had departed ; we were left behind.

"Oh, do hurry, and let us get home, Maurice," I exclaimed impatiently, "we shall be *so* late. Where are the horses ? Why did they not bring them here ?"

"I'll go and look after them. I suppose those stupid syces are waiting above at the far entrance. You stay here, and I'll be back in ten minutes." So saying, he started off at a run.

Boysie and I sat on the steps, side by side, in the gathering darkness ; no moon, not a star to be seen. Visions of snakes, horrible apprehensions of the head or the lily-white hand floated through my excited brain.

"I say, Nora ! Nora !" said Boysie suddenly, shifting himself exceedingly close to me. "This is rather creepy, is it not ?" A pause. "I don't think I'll stay here any longer. I'll go and get my pony and be off ; I'm not sure that I like this," confidentially. "I shall hook it !"

"You mustn't go—you shan't leave me," I urged, endeavouring to detain him. Boysie's company was better than none. "Stay with me, do, dear Boysie. Wait a little while," entreatingly.

"*Dear* Boysie, indeed," he sneered ; "because you are in a twitter about ghosts. I'm rather in a funk myself ; so, good-bye. I'm off." And wrenching himself from my persuasive hand, he jumped up, clattered down the steps, and vanished in the darkness. Here was a pretty situation in which to find myself—sitting alone on the threshold of the haunted mosque. If there were any ghosts, I was offering them a rash temptation. I peered into the gathering gloom—nothing to be seen ; not a sound to be heard but the bark of a fox, the hooting of owls, and the rumble of a country cart along the distant high-road. But stay ! what was that ? A moan, a groan ! issuing from the mosque behind me. My heart beat so loudly, I could hear it most distinctly. Another hollow, agonising moan ! My hair felt as if it was actually standing on end. Oh, would Maurice never, never come ! I endeavoured to rise, but a firm detaining hand laid heavily on my shoulders resisted the attempt. I made one more frantic effort, started to my feet, and fled down the steps like one possessed, and beheld,

oh joy ! a lantern twinkling towards me, and heard voices—oh, how welcome !—it was Maurice, the syces, and the horses. Breathlessly I stammered out my tale, and had barely concluded when a loud rude laugh indicated Boysie—Boysie who had played upon my fears, Boysie who had groaned, Boysie who had enjoyed the joke with intense glee and satisfaction. By the light of the lantern Maurice calmly surveyed my ghastly face and trembling demoralised appearance.

“Boysie, my friend, you are a first-class young ragamuffin, and I should heartily enjoy giving you a very sound thrashing,” he said sternly. “However, we will postpone it just for the present.” Then, having assisted me to mount, and placed the reins in my still shaking hands, “Here,” he added imperiously, “get on your pony, and come home ; and don’t stand grinning there.”

“I’m going home,” replied Boysie, mounting very deliberately ; “but I’m not such a fool as to go with you and Nora. Lord, what a fright I gave her !” cackling complacently. “No, no ! I’m not such an ass as to spoil sport. Two is company, and three——”

The last word was lost in a vicious lash bestowed on the skewbald, and in another second Boysie had galloped away into the darkness, leaving us *alone*.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

HER NAME WAS LAURA.

How silver sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,  
Like softest music to attending ears !

*Romeo and Juliet.*

"THAT youth Boysie wants wheeling into line !" muttered Maurice angrily, as we stumbled and scrambled along the narrow footpath, steering by Tuppence, whose white body was our guiding star—"it would afford me a melancholy pleasure to introduce him to a nice new cane." After half-an-hour's tedious progress we came out on the road, and the moon made her appearance almost simultaneously, so we were able to get forward at a brisk trot, which carried us over nearly three miles of our journey. The silver-faced moon threw a broad searching light on every object as we brought our horses once more to a walk, nearly opposite a dreary, deserted bungalow that stood a little way back from the high road.

"That place always gives me a feeling of intense repulsion," I remarked with a little shiver ; "no one has ever lived in it since someone shot himself there."

"You have horrors on the brain this evening, Nora. Who shot himself in that vile-looking habitation ?" said Maurice, looking back.

"Oh ! a Captain Somebody," I answered vaguely ; "they say he was jilted by some girl at home, and it preyed on his mind—of course he haunts the bungalow. I don't believe in people committing suicide because they are crossed in love, do you, Maurice ?"

"I do, for I knew a case of the kind," he returned gravely.

"But not because of a girl ?"

"Of course it was ; what else ?"

"Tell me all about it, do. Who was she? and did you know her?" I inquired eagerly.

"I am glad to say I did not know her. I knew him; he was one of my greatest friends. I never like talking about it, but I don't mind telling you, if you care to listen, and if you are sure that you have not had enough horrors already."

"Tell me about him; I should like to hear," I replied courageously. I was not afraid of anything with Maurice for my companion.

"This fellow's name was Maitland, and he and I were passengers out in the same trooper, and struck up an acquaintance. We were quartered in the same garrison, and became great friends; shared the same bungalow and dog-cart; and had our servants, horses, and dogs in common. We made lots of shooting-trips together, though he preferred sketching to shooting, and had rather a strong bias towards ladies' society. At the end of two years he came in for a legacy, and took six months' leave to England, on urgent private affairs. When he came out at the end of that period, the legacy was nearly all spent, but he had found, in its place, an inestimable treasure—her name was Laura, and Laura was dinned into my ears from morning till night. She was certainly very good-looking, to judge from a cabinet photo, in a velvet frame, that adorned our bachelor sitting-room, and half-a-dozen smaller ones that were scattered about in Maitland's own sanctum. He was completely changed. He was bewitched! All his thoughts were centred on her, and on saving money for their future home. All his odd rupees went in the purchase of silver ornaments and feminine gimcracks. Our sober bachelor veranda now became the haunt of all the hawkers in the place. Through the hottest time of year he studied Hindostani with a persevering monshi; he toiled from early morn till dewy eve, that he might get a staff appointment, and marry the girl of his heart. Toiled, whilst I lay in a long chair, read novels, and drank iced drinks. I sincerely pitied him, and wondered more and more at his infatuation. I can understand it *now*," he added in a lower voice, which I was not supposed to hear.

"Go on. Well?" I urged impatiently.

"He studied hard and passed," proceeded Maurice;

"he gave up smoking ; he gave up wine ; he gave up all society ; he became uncertain, irritable, and almost morose. Whether this was due to Laura, or overtaking his mind and denying himself all accustomed luxuries, I cannot say. Then there was a sudden falling off in her letters ; they became spasmodic instead of regular ; sometimes he had no letter for three weeks—by letter, I mean her effusions. Nothing else was a *letter* in his eyes. I cannot adequately describe his state of mind on mail evenings. For fully an hour before the post-peon was due, there was Maitland pacing the compound, listening eagerly for every step and querulous at any accidental sound within the bungalow ; and when the letter did come, with what avidity he seized it ! His gasp of relief was something pitiable to hear. When none came—no letter, his ghastly drawn face was indeed still more pitiable to see.

"You can fancy that things were not particularly pleasant for *me*. My friend, my companion, was gone, as far as I was concerned. He no longer cared a button for anyone in the world but Laura. I looked upon him as suffering from some kind of strange acute mental derangement, and vowed to myself, scores of times over, that I would rather suffer any fate than fall in love. At last I persuaded Maitland to come out for a shooting expedition. We were to be absent six weeks—no longer—and there would be just time for an answer to an all-important letter he had recently despatched—a letter of tender expostulation and reproach.

"So we went off into the jungles, far away from the weekly post ; and, at the end of six weeks we returned ; and during those six weeks I believe Maitland had been actually counting the hours and reckoning the minutes. No wonder his shooting was outrageously bad.

"He galloped into the cantonments a whole day ahead of me, no longer able to restrain his impatience ; and, as I jogged in quietly after him the next morning, I was beckoned into his bungalow by one of our married officers, with a face as long as my arm and a paper in his hand.

"‘There’s bad news for Maitland, this mail,’ he said ; ‘the girl he was engaged to, Miss Coupland——’

"‘What ! Is she dead ?’ I asked.

"‘No,’ he answered, thrusting the *Times* into my grasp, ‘married !’



" 'Poor old fellow !' he said ; ' he's safe to be awfully cut up. We knew something of her through mutual cousins. She is a handsome, heartless, worldly girl, and has thrown Maitland over for a decrepit baronet seventy years of age, with twenty thousand a year.'

" ' You'd better look after him,' said the major, following me down the steps, and, dropping his voice to a whisper, ' keep his revolver out of his way.'

" Well ? " I asked in a tone of breathless expectancy.

" Well," returned Maurice slowly, " I was just too late ! "

For some moments neither of us spoke ; and then he said : " *He* lies in an obscure corner of a garrison cemetery, and *she* is thought no end of in society by all accounts ; but nevertheless, in my opinion, she bears upon her forehead the brand of Cain ! Come, we had better be jogging on." My eyes felt misty as I once more started " Cavalier " at a brisk trot, which we kept up till we came within sight of Mulkapore, and within sound of the band, which was discoursing sweet sounds to a thronged audience round the stand ; they were playing " Die Lieben Langen Tag " waltzes as we went by, and somehow those waltzes were always connected with that evening in my memory.

" Hold on, now, let them walk," said Maurice ; " it seems a sin to go in this lovely night ! "

" They will be wondering what has become of us," I murmured apprehensively.

" Oh, they know you are all right, when you are with *me*," returned Maurice confidently, " and somehow I seem to see so little of you now, Nora, and who has a better right to your society ? " This statement was certainly open to dispute. " You are always taken up with other people," he continued in an injured tone.

" Once upon a time, the less you saw of me the better," I answered gaily.

" By Jove, I should think so ! " emphatically. " Who would ever have thought— By-the-way," interrupting himself hastily, " I had something to say to you, to consult you about," drawing forth a letter from his breast pocket.

" The new roof for Gallow ; I knew that was what Mr. Moore was driving at when he mentioned the leak. He was just breaking it to you gently."

"No, not Gallow *this* time," returned my cousin who, with the reins loose on his horse's neck, was looking over his epistle by the light of the moon. "Tell me, Nora," turning to me with a smile, "how do you think I would look in a cocked hat?"

"Magnificent," I replied impressively, without a second's hesitation; "but I have hitherto imagined that the Horse Artillery——"

"Yes, yes; but there is such a thing as an Artillery officer being on the staff—in short, General Ross, the new brigadier at Cheetapore, has offered to make me his A.D.C. I had an awfully kind letter from him this morning. I knew him very well up in Bengal, and it would be a capital billet."

The idea came upon me with a shock. Maurice going away! At first sight the prospect was unbearable, but, on second thoughts, perhaps it was all for the best. Mrs. Vane had been throwing out various unpleasant little hints of late, and I had by no means forgotten Maurice's suggestion under the tamarind-tree.

"The Rosses, General and Mrs., are two of the nicest people I ever met. The General is a very smart soldier, a thorough little gentleman, and a great racing man. Cheetapore is an A 1 station; I shall have extra pay, and if there is a row anywhere, I stand a good chance of being in the thick of it; for the General is a man of mark; where he goes *I* go—so what shall I say to him, Nora?" said Maurice, looking at me, an odd kind of smile lurking behind his moustache.

"I say *go*," I answered emphatically.

"Go!" he echoed, in a tone of most unqualified surprise and disappointment.

"Yes, certainly. Never refuse a good offer. Only think," I continued with a laugh, "you will be what poor Ali Baba called 'an arrangement in scarlet and gold.' You will be awful, and unapproachable. You can look exceedingly dignified on occasions; you have beautiful manners; you ride and dance admirably—in fact, now that I think of it, you are just cut out for an A.D.C., and will be exactly the right man in the right place."

I glanced at Maurice. He was looking straight before him, moodily twirling his moustache. The picture seemingly did not appeal to *him*.

"Probably you will hardly condescend to know us should we go down to Cheetapore for the races? What a swell you will be, galloping about with the general in a dark frock-coat, belts, and cocked hat! We can hardly expect you to notice us *then*; but perhaps in plain clothes——"

"What utter nonsense you are talking now!" interrupted Maurice hastily. "You know very well that I have not the smallest intention of accepting General Ross's offer."

"Not going to be his aide-de-camp—not going to Cheetapore?" I asked in a tone of unqualified amazement. "And why?"

"Why?" impatiently. "You know the reason perfectly. Because," leaning his hand on my horse's neck and looking full into my eyes, "because of *you*, Nora!"

"Because of *me*! What on earth have I to do with it?" I foolishly persisted.

"Everything," he replied emphatically.

Maurice's face was transformed. Maurice's voice vibrated with some unusual emotion. If Maurice's looks and words were to be believed, I represented everthing to him in this wide world. Major Percival—my plighted lover's—words and looks were as moonlight unto sunlight in comparison with those of my cousin. I turned abruptly away, my face as hot as fire, my heart beating unusually fast, and suddenly putting "Cavalier" into a smart canter, crossed our maidan at the top of his speed, with Maurice's words ringing in my ears, "Because of *you*, Nora!" I pulled up in front of our own veranda, and here, reposing in various chairs, and in various degrees of indignation, were auntie, Mrs. Vane, and Dicky. Auntie was serious, Mrs. Vane sarcastic, and Dicky was sulky!

"Really, Nora, *this* is no time for you to be coming home—a quarter to eight. I think you might have contrived to have kept with the others."

Thus spoke my aunt, who had been nursing her wrath to keep it warm, and had thoroughly succeeded.

"I hope you had a pleasant ride, a moonlight *tête-à-tête* is charming," sneered Dicky.

Mrs. Vane said nothing. I could see, from a glance she bestowed on me, that she meant to have it out with me

by-and-by, and at present her attention was riveted on Maurice.

"*Vogue la galère*," I said to myself. I never had had a more enjoyable ride—never; I felt most delightfully and disgracefully happy—why should I feel so elated? I, an engaged young lady? Simply because my cousin had ridden with me in the moonlight, and whispered soft nothings in my ear. But were they soft nothings? Mrs. Vane's bright eyes were fixed on Maurice; he was standing in the moonlight with his hat off, holding "*Desertborn*" by the bridle. Never had I seen him look so handsome or so happy! Leaving him to bear the brunt of the fray, and to make what apologies seemed good in his eyes, I sprang to the ground and hurried away to my own room.

My toilet was nearly completed (thanks to Drugo), for I was as uninterested and mechanical as any doll. My mind was undergoing a revolution. I did not know what I was doing, nor what I was wearing. The face that I beheld in the glass was dyed with blushes, and, oh shame! wreathed with smiles. Enter to me Mrs. Vane, a fixed purpose in her air and gait.

"Send away Drugo. I will fasten your dress," she said imperiously. Seeing Drugo effectively banished, and having buttoned my dress in ominous silence, she pushed me down into a low chair, and, transfixing me with her bright dark eyes, said: "And *how* much longer is this to go on?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, in a faint voice, as I reached for my bangles with ill-assumed carelessness.

"Mean?" she continued angrily. "I mean this flirtation with your cousin Maurice. I am surprised at you, Nora. I have been deceived, bitterly deceived and disappointed in you. I thought you an honest, sincere, open-hearted girl, incapable of acting a lie or playing a part. Now I know you. You are a heartless flirt!"

"Mrs. Vane!" I cried, starting to my feet.

"And," she proceeded undauntedly, "double-faced and deceitful into the bargain! You are acting a shameful, treacherous part to two men, your cousin and your intended. I came to give you my candid opinion of your conduct, as I am not deceitful. Now you know my sentiments; and

this very night, before I sleep, Maurice Beresford shall know the truth."

"I intend to tell him myself, I really do!" I stammered, with averted eyes.

"We all know the place that is said to be paved with good intentions, my young friend. You have been *intending* to tell him this long time; I will now relieve you of all trouble. Poor fellow, I sincerely pity him! How you have led him on; how you have dared to behave in such a way, is best known to yourself, Nora. It is plain to be seen that he is deeply in love with you—that he worships the very ground you tread on; and when he hears that all this time you are engaged to another man, what will he say? what will he think? He will despise and execrate the whole sex."

"Why should you say he is in love with me?" I answered, feeling that the old argument of cousin and play-fellow had been cut from beneath my feet by Maurice's own words not half an hour ago.

"Because he comes here daily to see your uncle, forsooth. Why does he linger at your side? Why does he look *distract* and preoccupied when you are not present? Why does he devote himself to you absolutely when you appear?" gesticulating with both hands. "I know that my warning and my news will come too late; nevertheless, I shall tell Captain Beresford of your engagement this very evening."

"Do not!" I exclaimed; "please, please do not; give me one day more! On my word of honour, I will tell him to-morrow!"

"Very well, then. I'll give you till this time to-morrow—not another hour."

So saying, Mrs. Vane, with a very impressive nod—at once of warning and reproof—took up her candle and departed.

When I was left alone (although it was dangerously near dinner-time), I indulged myself in a really good cry. I could not help it; I knew that I had done wrong; that I was all Mrs. Vane had said—deceitful and treacherous—though I had never meant to be either. Lack of moral courage was the rock on which I had wrecked my happiness. I was a wicked, a very wicked girl, and miserably

unhappy into the bargain ; and I buried my face in the pillow of my sofa and wept right bitterly.

At length I roused myself, bathed my eyes, stared at the ceiling in a vain hope of banishing their red rims, and made a tardy appearance at the dinner-table. I'm sure that Maurice remarked my recent tears. I saw him gazing at me more than once during dinner with amazement and concern ; he seemed exceedingly anxious to discover the reason of my grief, and endeavoured to elicit the truth in a politely roundabout way. His veiled enquiries met with no success. Nevertheless, he did his utmost to efface the recollection of my unknown grievance by every means in his power ; but I resolutely avoided him, repelled all his attentions, and pleading a bad headache (attributed to the *sun* !), immediately after dinner I withdrew from the company, and retired to my own apartment.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHEN WE TWO PARTED IN SILENCE AND TEARS.

Thy fate and mine are sealed ;  
I strove against the stream, and all in vain.

*Princess.*

THE day after Mrs. Vane's remonstrance was one to which we had long looked forward. The West Shetlanders were giving a moonlight picnic to some very celebrated old tombs and mosques, about ten miles from Mulkapore. We had all to provide for our own transport as far as the city walls, outside which elephants awaited the enterprising, and carriages those who were not so ambitious. A long row of about twenty of these animals was ranged close to the city-gate, each gaily caparisoned in a scarlet cover, with deep green fringe, and on their broad backs the ancient body of a hooded buggy was securely tied with ropes. I believe elephants to be the most sagacious and intelligent of all quadrupeds. As they stood in a solemn row, blinking at us out of their ridiculous little eyes, I am convinced that they were discussing us among themselves, and exchanging ponderous jokes as they lounged against each other, and threw dust on their heads. The guests were despatched in pairs. As a buggy was only capable of accommodating two, my fellow-passenger was Dicky Campbell. He showed an extraordinary eagerness to share my buggy, and my efforts to elude his society were vain.

The elephant having knelt, we nimbly ascended the ladder and took our seats, holding on with might and main whilst our huge steed got up again. We immediately took our place in the procession, and following our leaders at a rapid shuffling walk, streamed through the city. It was my first visit there by daylight, and Dicky pointed out to me the Shar-Minar, the great mosque, the silver bazaar, and

groups of surly-looking Arabs, with their long silver-mounted jazils, clustered round almost every corner. Blocked as were the narrow streets, our ponderous animals soon effected a passage, and ere long we made our way beyond the walls once more into the open country.

I looked on Dicky Campbell as a family friend, and much in the same light as I regarded Rody; but for a considerable time I had had an uneasy conviction that he did not entertain the same views with regard to me. No, he wished me to be "nearer and dearer yet than all other." In vain I endeavoured to keep our acquaintance on the old friendly footing, and set my face resolutely against tender allusions and personalities, and was stone deaf to sentimental speeches and all compliments.

Dicky was changed; no longer the gay, cheery companion he had once been, but cynical, irritable, and at times morose, especially morose when Maurice was in my company. There was no concealing from myself that he was outrageously jealous, and the rudeness of his answers and incivility of his remarks were frequently a palpable strain on even Maurice's well-known easy temper and proverbial good-nature; and Maurice (who had never been enthusiastic about Dicky) treated him with a formal, frozen politeness, worse, in my opinion, than downright incivility, or the retort uncourteous itself!

For a complete *solitude à deux*, for utter isolation from all other fellow-creatures save one, commend me to the howdah on the back of an elephant. But there is no escape from a disagreeable companion till the journey is accomplished; no stopping, no getting down. I had a horrible misgiving that I had been trapped, and that Dicky meant to seize this glorious opportunity for making the proposal that I had so long and so dexterously avoided. I made conversation, and started topic after topic, with feverish anxiety, but my efforts were futile. Dicky was not to be foiled. We had hardly quitted the city, ere I found him laying his heart and pay at my feet. I refused him with all the gentleness, and at the same time with all the firmness I could command. I told him that I would always be his friend—his friend, but nothing more; that I was sincerely sorry to find that he cared for me in a different



way, but that some day I hoped he would meet a worthier object, who would reciprocate his affections.

All this I said lamely and hesitatingly, as far as utterance went; but my resolve was unshaken. For more than two miles, Dicky refused to listen to the word *No*—spoken never so sweetly. He pleaded his cause with all the eloquence at his disposal, although I assured him that my decision was unalterable. At length I lost all patience, and was so explicit and outspoken that even *his* dulness was penetrated; and he maintained a sulky and would-be dignified silence for the remainder of the journey. I felt exceedingly sorry for myself, and for Dicky. Why could he not be content with being my friend? Why should he expect me to love and marry him, *coûte qui coûte*? How unreasonable he was to be so angry with me! Our position was, to say the least of it, embarrassing. Whatever you do, never quarrel in a howdah, where you have no means of escape from your antagonist, but are obliged to sit side by side, seemingly on terms of the warmest friendship. I was unfeignedly glad to reach our journey's end, though I am afraid my flushed face, and Mr. Campbell's lowering brow, told a tale to more than one penetrating eye.

Our elephant carried a bell, which he had clanged playfully from time to time; he rang it joyfully now, as we prepared to descend from his back.

"Your elephant is the bearer of two bells," cried the gallant Globe-trotter, waddling hastily forward to assist me to alight. How ugly he looked in his brick-coloured, mushroom topee, checked sack coat, and roomy cricket-shoes. What a contrast to Maurice, in his broad-leaved Terai hat and well-cut light suit! He looked refreshingly cool, and particularly handsome, as he stepped forward, with a polite "Allow me?" cut out the broiling and breathless Globe-trotter, and handed me carefully down the ladder. A most *recherché* cold dinner awaited us. Every dainty possible to procure was set out in profusion—truffled turkey and boar's-head, *pâté de fois gras*, Maraschino jelly, and iced pudding, accompanied by wines of the choicest brands. But before we sat down to table, I was accosted by Mrs. Vane, with brilliant cheeks and sparkling eyes.

"I want to speak to you, for one second, Nora," leading me aside. "Come down this walk for a moment. Listen

to me," she added, when we had reached a secluded shady spot. "I came in the same carriage as Mrs. Stubbs, and I have had *such* a field-day with her!"

"Ah! I thought you looked flushed with victory!" I remarked, with ill-assumed sprightliness.

"Now, Nora!" said my friend reprovingly; "I am not in the humour for joking with you. I never can be the same to you again—never!"

"Have you brought me down here especially to tell me this?" I interrupted impatiently.

"No; but to give you a word of friendly warning you do not deserve. *You* were the bone of contention between Mrs. Stubbs and me; I fought for you, and took your part—for the last time let me assure you. She knows all about your affair, and said in her most sneering way: 'If it is true that Miss Neville is engaged to Major Percival she is making an utter fool of her cousin, Captain Beresford. It will be a real charity to open his eyes, and I will enact the part of the good Samaritan on the first opportunity.'"

I shuddered perceptibly.

"So now, Nora, you have not an instant to lose," continued my companion impressively. "I have long endeavoured——" Whatever she was going to add was interrupted by one of our hosts, who had entered the walk and was coming hurriedly towards us.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Miss Neville. Dinner is ready, and I am to have the pleasure of leading you to the festive board. Mrs. Vane, you are another defaulter; your partner is going round all the tombs in a state of abject desolation. May I have the honour of conducting you as well as Miss Neville?" offering us each an arm.

I was led to a seat near the head of the table, which was already surrounded by a gay and numerous company. I felt anything but merry as I reflected on Mrs. Vane's caution, and the avowal that I must make within the next few hours. "Misfortunes never come singly," I thought, as I gazed across at my skeleton at the feast, Dicky—Dicky, whose countenance wore an expression of the deepest, most incurable gloom; who declined to catch my pleading eyes, and who was quaffing far too many beakers of champagne.

Boysie the ubiquitous was also within view (having been brought by special desire). As usual, he was attending

most sedulously to his bodily refreshment. I was exceedingly angry with Boysie, and it afforded me a melancholy pleasure to see him questing about, plate in hand, in search of the most notoriously unwholesome dainties. Maurice and Eva were enjoying themselves very much, in another way. They looked the happiest and best-matched couple at the table. Could it be possible that Mrs. Vane was wrong? that she had been the victim of her ardent imagination? and I, myself, equally mistaken? All young men flirted, and made speeches to girls—signifying nothing. Why should not Maurice do the same? This unction was not flattering: but I laid it to my soul with a certain indescribable feeling of painful relief.

After dinner, the company set about exploring the old ruins, gardens, and tombs. These latter were twelve in number, and each as large as a good sized church. Their exquisite stone carvings had been whitewashed by some Goth, but in the flattering glamour of the moonlight they resembled white marble, and seemed to look down with cold disdainful dignity on the lively throng, whose laughter and voices made their vaulted domes echo and the solemn stately solitude of their surrounding gardens ring again.

Dancing commenced with great spirit on a flagged terrace in front of one of the outer buildings; but I was not in the humour for waltzing on uneven pavement, and after the second dance, I wandered away into the gardens with Maurice for my companion. It was as bright as day, as we strolled from one tomb to another. Along terraces, up and down white flights of steps, and through pathways lined with flowering shrubs and tall palms, between the branches of which, at each turn, we caught glimpses of the perfect outline of some tomb, towering clear cut and silver white against the dark blue starry sky. At length we came to a large marble tank, down to whose margin long shallow flights of steps descended at each of the four corners. We leant our elbows on the parapet, and gazed into the still water below, which reflected, as in a looking-glass, a neighbouring mosque, with its four picturesque little minarets.

“How quiet and peaceful it is! Let us go down and sit on those steps,” I said; and leading the way I descended, and seated myself almost at the edge of the water.

For some time we preserved an unbroken silence.

Maurice was smoking, and I was thinking, and, for *me*, thinking profoundly. The splash of a frog was the only sound that broke the surrounding stillness, till an old wandering fakir came and peered over at us, muttering volubly to himself; but the only words that I could catch were "Feringhee! Feringhee!" Soon a band of explorers took noisy possession of a neighbouring building. We heard their peals of gay laughter as they climbed up the narrow winding staircase. Shouts of ecstasy announced to us that some specially stout party had become jammed in the ascent. After prolonged shrieks of amusement and expostulation, the whole company seemingly broke loose on the roof of the turret, and chased each other round and round.

"Don't you wish you were with them?" inquired Maurice lazily.

"Not I!" I returned loftily, throwing a stone into the middle of the pool.

"In old days Nora O'Neill would have been in the first flight among that lot," nodding his head in the direction of our riotous neighbours. "Does it not seem odd, Nora, that you and I should be wandering together out here as much at home among these Indian scenes as we were among the fields and lanes about Gallow?"

"No, it does not strike me in that light; it seems perfectly natural," I returned unguardedly.

"I believe there is a fate in these things," he muttered to himself, as he sent a stone artistically skipping across the pool. "I firmly believe in *kismet*, as they call it out here; don't you?" he asked, raising himself on his elbow, and looking at me interrogatively.

Before I could reply, a high shrill falsetto suddenly exclaimed, "So there you are!" and at the same moment I descried Mrs. Gower's faded face gazing curiously down on us.

"What a snug retreat! quite a Scriptural scene; Jacob and Rachel at the well; they were cousins, too, were they not, Colonel Fox?" turning to her companion.

"Aw—haw! Don't know, I'm shaw—thought they were husband and wife. You have no idee—yaw" (to us) "how awfully jolly you look down there," leaning over and

surveying us admiringly ; " I vote we go down there too, Mrs. Gower, eh ? so jolly cool."

" Certainly *not*," returned the lady with very unnecessary emphasis ; " we should be greatly *de trop*," lowering her voice, and giggling affectedly as she turned away.

I pretended not to have heard this little dialogue, but I could not prevent my complexion from assuming a brilliantly crimson tint, and I kept my eyes studiously averted from my cousin.

I had not forgotten my promise to Mrs. Vane, and as I sat on the lower steps, with my chin resting on my hand, I was busily revolving in my own mind how I was to break my news to Maurice.

" A penny for your thoughts," he said abruptly.

" Give me the penny, then," I replied with an assumed sprightliness, raising my head, and holding out an expectant palm.

" Earn your penny first," he rejoined, pretending to search his pockets. " I never pay in advance."

" Well, then, I was thinking of *you* !" I exclaimed, now determined to take the plunge and have it over. " I have something particular to say to you."

" Have you really ? " he returned, rousing himself from his listless attitude, and tossing his cigar into the water, where it extinguished itself in one indignant fizz.

" And strange to say, Nora, I was thinking of *you* ; and I have something important to impart to you," he said, taking a seat beside me. " Which of us is to speak first ? " he asked with a smile.

" You are, of course ! " I returned eagerly, only too glad to postpone my confession, even at the eleventh hour. " You are the eldest—do *you* begin."

" Very well," he replied, taking off his hat, and throwing it at our feet. " Now, attention ! In the first place, my little cousin, I am going to lecture you ; and I hope you will listen to me with more respect than last time, when you cut short my remonstrances by flinging your hat out of the window, and jumping after it."

" It will be your hat, not mine, that will suffer this time," I answered, picking up his Terai, and waving it threateningly towards the water.

" You had better not," he said, with assumed indigna-

tion, making a vain effort to recapture his headgear. "Tell me, Nora," he went on, "how did you and your travelling companion agree this afternoon? You did not look radiantly happy when you arrived."

"What do you mean, Maurice?" I asked with assumed amazement.

"I do not profess to be a particularly keen observer, nor sharper than my neighbours, but even *I* could see that your relations were a little *strained*, as they say in political parlance; even *I* could read 'rejected' and 'dejected,' written in large characters on Campbell's face, as he descended from your mutual elephant! Poor boy, it was too bad! Why did you make a fool of him, Nora? He was bad enough in his natural state."

"It was not *my* fault," I exclaimed with great emphasis. "I gave him no encouragement. I could not help it."

"Oh yes, you could!" interrupted my cousin, coolly. "Excuse me, but you womankind have a subtle way of knowing when a fellow cares for you. You must have seen what was coming, and you could easily have administered one of those brusque retorts for which you were once so justly famous. A rudely delivered home-truth, when the first symptoms of the fatal disease developed themselves in Master Dicky, might have given him a pang at the time, but would have saved him a mortal wound. Now, *nothing* cuts a fellow up so much as being refused, especially if he is fond of the girl, and she has led him on and fooled him into thinking that his feelings were reciprocated——"

"You are speaking from sad experience, I conclude?" I put in with a ghastly effort at gaiety.

"And Dicky is not your *only* admirer!" pursued Maurice, regardless of my interruption. "There is the sporting major and our mutual friend the Globe-trotter, only waiting a fitting opportunity to prostrate himself at your feet. Young Forbes, of the Cavalry, too, is badly hit."

"Maurice! how can you talk such absurd nonsense?" I expostulated, avoiding his eyes, and busying myself in rolling and unrolling his unfortunate hat.

"I am talking sober sense," he replied impressively.

"When a young lady possesses four distinctly separate adorers the situation becomes, to say the least of it, *acute*. Seriously, Nora, I should be sorry to think that my little unsophisticated country cousin had developed into that most hateful creature, an accomplished flirt."

"Maurice!"

"I don't say you *have*, mind you; I am only giving you a friendly warning. I do not believe that you are one of those girls who look on every proposal as an honourable trophy, or take a man's heart as an Indian brave would his scalp; but it is neither honourable nor right to lead fellows on to think you mean to marry them, and then turn round and say, 'Ten thousand times *no*!' Spare the too susceptible youth of Mulkapore; and as you are strong, be merciful!"

"What a sermon!" I exclaimed, rising with a gesture of deprecation. "I hope you have nearly finished, for I have something to tell you."

"Not quite," he answered, also standing erect, "I have one word more to say," and here he paused.

"Well, then, 'In conclusion,' as Mr. French would say," I replied with would-be playfulness.

I eyed Maurice with some surprise; all trace of banter and raillery had vanished from his expression. He looked grave and even agitated, and a conviction, more felt than seen, told me that he was under the influence of some strong emotion as he stood bareheaded before me.

"In conclusion, then," he said, looking at me very earnestly, and speaking in a low but steady voice, "suppose you put a period to all these fellows' sufferings, Nora, by telling them that you are *engaged to me*."

For a moment I was so taken aback that I was completely stupefied, and unable to utter a word. At length I found my voice.

"I thought I had forbidden you to allude to *that*!" I cried vehemently.

"Hear me for a second, Nora," said Maurice impetuously, forcibly taking my hand. "I am not *now* thinking of your grandfather's 'bargain,' as you called it. I am thinking only of Nora Neville. I am sure you know that she is everything in the world to *me*. I am speaking as if I

had never heard of you, and never known you, till I met you out here. I am speaking entirely for myself. Listen to me," he continued with a gesture of appeal, seeing an interruption trembling on my lips. "Listen to me for one moment longer. I fully intended honourably to have kept my promise to my uncle, but you know you frustrated my good intentions by running away! I searched for you far and near, and at last gave up the quest in despair. I am not a susceptible fellow, and I went through life quite heart-whole till I met you at the Residency ball. I am poor, as no one knows better than yourself, Nora, and you, no doubt, could make a much better match as far as money and all that goes, and I am not half good enough for you (humbly); but no one will ever love you as well as I do. You understand that it is not because you are my cousin that I am saying all this; it is because I love you with all my heart and soul," he went on very earnestly, and still tightly clasping my hand. "Tell me, Nora darling, do you care for me?"

"Maurice, Maurice," I faltered, endeavouring to release my hand, "you *don't* know." Here my voice shook so that I became utterly unintelligible and hysterical, and I trembled from head to foot, like an aspen-leaf.

"I will take silence for consent," whispered my companion, and, putting his arm round my waist, he drew me towards him, and kissed me.

This kiss acted like an electric shock, and brought me thoroughly to my senses.

"Let me go, Maurice; let me go!" I cried passionately; "do you hear me?" struggling to free myself.

"Not till you have given me an answer," he replied resolutely. "Nora, I know you care for me a *little*—not a hundredth part as much as I care for you, but still a little. Come, won't you tell me the truth?"

"I tell you that I am engaged," I stammered forth. "You have no right to speak to me like this," with spurious indignation. "I am engaged to Major Percival."

"What!" ejaculated Maurice, now not merely releasing me, but pushing me rudely from him. "*What* did you say? My ears must have deceived me," leaning against the wall with a face as white as death.

"I am engaged," I repeated quite volubly, now that I



had recovered my speech. "I met Major Percival on the hills last year. He is coming here very shortly ; but until then we do not wish our engagement to be made public. No one is to know."

A long, a complete, a most eloquent silence succeeded my tardy announcement. I glanced timidly at Maurice ; I fairly quailed before him. Incredulous amazement and wrathful indignation shone in his eyes. For some minutes the faint lapping of the water at our feet was the only sound. At length he spoke in a hard, restrained, mechanical voice :

"So you have been engaged for months, have you? meanwhile leading me on to believe that you cared for me, merely *pour passer le temps*. I was pleading for others just now, little knowing that I myself have been the greatest dupe of all! Heavens! what an infatuated fool I have been!" he muttered. "But how was I to know that I was in the toils of a hardened, unscrupulous coquette? You knew that I loved you!" he cried, turning to me fiercely. "Never dare to deny it! You led me on, in a fool's paradise, from day to day ; you possessed yourself of every thought of my heart. I looked on you as my dearer and better self, as my good angel."

I could give no idea of the scorn with which Maurice brought out this last peroration, or of the horrible, cynical laugh that accompanied it.

"I gave you all I had to give—an honest man's love. I would have given you my soul had it been possible. I believed—oh, credulous fool, that you *loved* me!—yes ; can your mind grasp such inordinate vanity?—and I looked forward to a long and happy future spent with *you*, and lo, with one word, my hopes are demolished! You calmly tell me that you are engaged"—"engaged" with withering contempt—"enjoying the security of a secret engagement, and permitting yourself to receive the addresses of half-a-dozen deluded suitors. What pleasure has it given you to raise my hopes, only to dash them to the ground? What amusement has it afforded you to have wrecked my life, to have destroyed all my faith in your sex? Answer me!"

Maurice's voice literally shook with passion as he denounced me. It trembled as I gazed at him in conscience-

stricken silence. I shall never forget him as he stood before me that evening, never, as long as I live. The cold white moonlight gave his severely-cut features an unnaturally stern expression, that overawed and confounded me, and I was at a loss to recognise my kind and devoted cousin Maurice in my stern and merciless accuser.

"I never meant it," I whimpered plaintively; "I always intended to tell you of my engagement," I sobbed, now quite broken down and subdued.

"And why did you not tell me—nay, I need not ask?" he pursued, with scathing sarcasm; "you preferred to play your fish a little longer!"

"I thought you only cared for me as a cousin," I gasped, eagerly clutching every straw of an excuse, "as a friend."

"I don't believe you," returned Maurice forcibly. "Insultingly rude as it sounds, I do *not* believe you; and, more than that, you do not believe it yourself, in your heart, if you have such an organ. You knew very well that I loved you!" After a pause, during which I continued to weep copiously, and with no effect whatever on my hard-hearted kinsman, he proceeded: "And *who* is the fortunate possessor of your innocent affections?"

"Major Hastings Percival; the Honourable Hastings Percival," I murmured in woebegone tones.

"What? Peacock Percival!" in a shocked voice. "Impossible! Why he is more than double your age! You have not an idea in common."

"Oh yes, we have," I hastily interposed. "He is very fond of botany and music."

"Botany and music!" echoed Maurice. "A pretty foundation on which to build a home. But I see it all," he added reflectively. "I have never given you credit for one of your gifts—a large share of worldly wisdom. I find that you quite understand the spirit of your age, my pretty cousin. Love is an old worn-out delusion, and only fit to be entertained by the inmates of a lunatic asylum. You will be rich—that is the main thing now—and, with a coronet dangling before your eyes, you will see no faults in Major Percival. What have I to offer but a few barren acres? and what is a miserable captain of artillery in comparison with a future lord?"

"Why should you assume that I am marrying Major Percival for his money and position?" I asked, plucking up a little spirit, and drying my tears.

"Do you ask me to believe that you are marrying him for love?" returned Maurice, with slow distinct utterance, and looking into my eyes as though he would read my very soul. "Ah! your face is enough; do not trouble yourself to tell a falsehood. So Mrs. Roper's golden precepts did *not* go in at one ear and out at the other. I think I can remember one of them verbatim. You were to have nothing to say to the military; they were poor but pleasant, and she recommended the civil element to your particular notice. How admirably you have carried out her instructions!"

"Maurice——"

"No, I will speak for once," he proceeded, in the same tone of withering sarcasm. "I wear Her Majesty's uniform, and heaven knows I am poor enough, and occasionally you have found my society pleasant; the cap fits *me* exactly. And as to a rich civilian, have you not favoured Major Percival with your attention, your affections" (with a laugh), "and the promise of your hand? You have achieved the position Mrs. Roper recommended; accept my best congratulations. If you go on as you have commenced—and you are a young lady of great promise—you will outrival Laura yet; it is a mere question of opportunity."

"Maurice, how dare you compare me to *her*!" I cried, aglow with indignation. "You called her a murderess."

"Let me assure you of one thing," he resumed, completely ignoring my expostulation, and stooping to pick up his hat. "In me you see the last of your victims. Your propensity for keeping dangerous secrets must be checked. This very evening the fact of your engagement shall be known far and wide. I shall take good care to erect such a moral finger-post that no other unlucky fool shall share *my* fate," speaking in a tone of fierce resolve. "Come along," he continued roughly, "I am going to take you back to your aunt. I have done with you!" moving aside to permit me to pass up the steps.

"Maurice, you are very hard on me; if you only knew—if you would listen to me——"

"I know quite enough. You are a deceitful, heartless,

unscrupulous flirt, without the ghost of a notion of the meaning of the words 'honour' and 'truth.' I don't wish to know anything more about you," he rejoined in a manner that effectually disposed of argument.

My demoralisation was complete. I could make no stand against Maurice's bitter sarcasms or biting truths. I accompanied him back to the rest of the party in solemn silence, vainly endeavouring to repress the tears that would keep rolling from my eyes in spite of all my efforts to restrain them. As we came into the light emitted by dozens of coloured paper lanterns, we found that a dance had just been concluded, and all the recent performers were sitting in tiers on the steps; consequently our return was remarkably public and conspicuous. We walked up the whole length of the terrace in search of auntie, the cynosure of all eyes.

"Oh, here are Captain Beresford and Nora!" cried Boysie Towers, bounding towards us like a new ball. "They have had no dancing; and oh, I say!" he shrieked, capering before me, "*Nora has been crying!*"

"You little fiend!" I heard Maurice mutter between his teeth. "If you say another word, I shall *will* you!"

I gladly sought refuge with Mrs. Vane, who charitably made room for me on the steps beside her, and still more humanely lent me her fan.

"I see you have told him," she whispered, with ready comprehension.

I was choking, and the only answer I was able to vouchsafe was a nod. Ever grateful shall I be to Mrs. Vane for her good offices that disastrous evening. She kept the Globe-trotter at bay, in spite of his obstinate determination to come and sit between us, and "make himself agreeable." She parried all Mrs. Gower's sarcastic inquiries, and shielded me when I was completely *hors de combat*, and utterly unable to take any part in the surrounding chatter. Indignation, shame, and mortification were struggling in my breast; my eyes were nearly blinded with tears; but I was not so completely *blind* that I failed to see Maurice and auntie in earnest conversation. Shortly afterwards he took his leave. I watched his fast receding dog-cart rapidly disappearing along

the white moonlit road, with feelings I found it hard to analyse.

Maurice was quite as good as his word. He kept his promise and erected his finger-post. The following day my engagement to Major Percival was the latest news in Mulkapore !

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### IN UNCLE'S BLACK BOOKS.

My merry, merry, merry roundelay  
Concludes with Cupid's curse :  
They that do change old love for new,  
Pray gods, they change for worse.

THE news of my engagement created a profound sensation in our immediate circle, and I was considered sly, clever, fortunate, or fitted to adorn any sphere, according as our friends had marriageable daughters of their own or *not*. On the whole, I gained a very considerable accession of respect from people who already saw in me the future Lady Rodcaster. Truly, I was nobly fulfilling Mrs. Roper's prediction. I had soared even beyond her anticipations ! Major Percival was actually higher than the mark to which she had encouraged me to aspire ! Nevertheless, I did not feel specially elated, nor particularly happy. Somehow, I was not in favour at *home*, much as I was commended abroad.

Auntie had spoken to me very seriously the morning after that disastrous picnic. She told me that she was exceedingly pained to find that I had never told Maurice of my engagement, but had let him think that I was free, and led him on to care for me, and to suppose that I cared for him. I had behaved altogether in a deceitful, unmaidenly manner, and there was no doubt that I was a heartless flirt, prepared to sacrifice everything to my insatiable craving for admiration and attention. "Supposing, too, it should come to Major Percival's ears !" This suggestion had no terrors for me—but I was overwhelmed by her displeasure. I could not have believed that she could have looked so austere or spoken so severely. Mrs. Vane was evidently behind the scenes and in auntie's confidence. She informed me that

Maurice had gone away on two months' leave, never to return ; he was about to exchange into another battery elsewhere—"the farther from Mulkapore the *better*," she added in a very pointed manner. And she was now strangely cool to me ; I was no longer her "dear, silly old Noah," "her pet lamb," her "Nora Creina." She treated me with stiff conventional politeness, and made occasional very stinging allusions to lambs in wolves' clothing, and mercenary marriages. Uncle, too, was altered. My unlucky *affaires de cœur* had come to a crisis all at once. Was it not bad enough that he should hear of Maurice's proposal—that a whisper of Dicky's rejection was wafted to his angry ears ? but why, oh malignant fate, did the irrepressible Globe-trotter select the same epoch for waiting on him, and asking my hand in marriage ?

He no longer petted me, teased me, or inveigled me into his study to listen to shikar stories, or to dust his tiger skulls. Oh dear no ! He held completely aloof, and treated me with an air of cool, almost hostile, disapproval. At length one day I bravely bearded him in his den, and asked him point-blank, "why he was so changed to me ?—anything would be better than the way we were going on."

"What have you done ? Why am I so different to what I used to be ? You want to know, do you ?" he replied, still pursuing his occupation—oiling the lock of a pet rifle. "I answer your question by a question," he proceeded, still rubbing away with a greasy oil-rag. "Why did you flirt with your cousin Maurice ? Why did you never tell him of your engagement ? Why," raising his voice suddenly, "did you make an utter and complete fool of him ?" Then laying down his rifle, and looking me straight in the face, "Here," he proceeded, "within one month, to my certain knowledge, you have had three proposals, and you an engaged young woman all the time ! I'm ashamed of you—ashamed to think that you belong to me. You have disgraced yourself in my eyes, and fallen immeasurably in my estimation," he concluded decisively.

"Uncle, uncle, you must not say so. As far as Mr. Campbell and Mr. Dalton were concerned, I give you my word of honour that I gave them no encouragement. I did

all I could to keep them at a distance, to show them that we were to be the merest friends --nothing more. And as to Maurice ——" I paused.

"Yes, and as to Maurice, you did all in your power to keep him at a distance too. Are you going to tell me *that*, eh?" he sneered. "Liding with him, walking with him, talking with him, dancing with him; and your aunt and I, like two old idiots, thinking that he knew all about the other fellow the whole time, and was only—— I've no patience to think of it!" he exclaimed angrily. "Beresford was ten times too good for you; and that's the pure and unadulterated truth. Now mark my words, we will have no more proposals, no more entanglements; you have made your deliberate choice and must stick to it. I would not be a bit surprised," ironically, "to hear that you were thinking of getting out of your engagement with Major Percival." Was he reading my thoughts? "But as you have given him your promise you shall certainly marry him; there will be no more playing fast and loose with anyone else if I can help it, mark my words," he concluded, once more taking up his rifle and polishing away with extraordinary zeal and energy.

Here ended uncle's lecture. I spent a very miserable time after Maurice's departure; uncle was flint, auntie was ice, and Mrs. Vane intensely disagreeable. At length Major Percival announced his intention of paying a visit to Mulkapore; a bachelor friend had offered him house-room. We could not take him in, as Mrs. Vane occupied our only spare room, and uncle, prejudiced uncle, had declared that "he would not have that piano-playing fellow staying in the house." My *fiancé* duly arrived, and was met by us at the station and brought home to dinner. I beheld him step out of a saloon carriage without any increased beating of the heart or change of colour, although I had not seen him for more than six months.

I was sensible of *no* emotion as he took my hand in his, excepting that I experienced a strange chill of disappointment. He seemed quite different to what I had pictured him in my mental vision, quite different to the recollections I had brought away from the hills; and yet six months was too short a time to work any really appreciable



alteration in his appearance. Had the rarefied hill air lent a halo to his aspect?

No, it had *not*. The change was in *myself*. He was no longer, in my eyes, an aristocratic looking man in the prime of life; but a portly, elderly gentleman, travelling with an enormous amount of impedimenta, and as solicitous about his small parcels as any old maid. His belongings included an elaborate dressing-bag, tiffin-basket, pillows, French novels, umbrellas and sticks, a flask of eau-de-Cologne, and a large *fan*. When his mind was at length perfectly at rest about their safety, and his two servants had been reduced to the verge of imbecility, Major Percival found time to turn to me, and utter a few stereotyped phrases on the pleasure it gave him to see me again, keeping all the time a sharp look-out on the accumulating pile in front of him. His conversation was rather spasmodic, and his attention divided between his baggage and his betrothed.

"Nora, my dear girl! I have been looking forward to—— Chinasaomy," excitedly, "where's my travelling-clock?" His anxiety allayed by the prompt production of that article, he resumed: "to this meeting for months, and——" To his servant: "Where are you going to with that white portmanteau, you fool!"

At last he was really under weigh, and we took our seats in the carriage with a sense of relief; my intended waving a bland but empty hand towards the crowd of clamouring coolies, who had helped to carry his luggage, saying, as he leant back luxuriously, "I never asked those fellows for their services. My own two boys were sufficient for all my requirements; and if they liked to work for the pleasure of the thing, *tant mieux*."

I thought such a speech savoured of intense meanness; and if he was not ashamed of himself, at any rate I blushed for him when I encountered Mrs. Vane's mischievous dark eyes.

Dinner that evening was a stiff affair; and, after a short, drowsy conversation in the drawing-room, auntie and Mrs. Vane deserted the apartment with vague or bare excuses, and left me to enjoy (?) a *tête-à-tête* with my lover. *Lover!* the word was a gross misfit for the gentleman opposite to me, who lolled back in his armchair, the very

embodiment of luxurious self-satisfaction, pleased with himself, with his dinner, and his surroundings.

I sat at the centre table some distance from him, pretending to work by the light of a reading-lamp, and discoursing of the weather and his journey in a very half-hearted way; for all the time I was saying to myself: "Why did I ever become engaged to Major Percival?" He seemed so old, so patronising, so pompous. A fear for the future and its unknown difficulties, a dawning of doubt, struck a chill to my very heart. Then again, I would angrily rebuke myself and try to conjure up all the rosiest reminiscences I had carried away from the Blue Mountains; but it was in vain—it was useless. I could no longer idealise him—awful discovery!

*Maurice stood between us!*

No wonder that with these conflicting feelings in my mind my conversation was a little *distract* and "jerky." I glanced over at my companion once or twice, and each time I found him critically scanning me, scanning me as one would look at a picture or a valuable work of art. At length he said querulously:

"Do you know that you are not looking at all well, Nora? You are much thinner than you were; the lines of your face have lost that nice soft contour, and are quite thin and sharpened, and your colour is gone!"

"Is it?" I answered indifferently, selecting as I spoke a needleful of silk.

"It is, indeed," he replied, with unusual animation, and in a tone of voice that showed me that he regarded my loss of looks as a distinctly *personal* grievance.

"Suppose you go and sing something," he added, with the air of a three-tailed bashaw; "you have not lost your voice, I hope."

I had not lost my voice, but I was very nearly losing my temper as I walked to the piano, and singled out my last new song. It gave me a very disagreeable sensation to find that I was valued for my looks and my accomplishments, and not for *myself*. How different to one's accepted idea of a lover! If Maurice had thought that I looked ill and thin, would *he* have grumbled at my altered appearance?

"What business had I to think of him? How dared I

contrast him with Major Percival?" was my remorseful reflection, as in vain I endeavoured to woo the fickle goddess, Sleep. All night long I lay awake, tumbling and tossing, revolving many things in my excited brain. The more my thoughts dwelt on the future, the more wretched and miserable I felt. A pretty state of mind for the young lady who was about to make the best match of the season in Her Majesty's Indian empire!

I did not love Major Percival. Alas, never could love him now! I did not know if I even liked my future husband. How, then, could I marry him? I asked myself this question over and over again, and towards dawn fell into a restless slumber, with the query still unanswered.

Major Percival established himself speedily in Mulkapore, lost no time in calling on the residents, and arranged his day so that a generous portion of it fell to *my* share.

Every morning he walked over to chotah-hazree; and every afternoon I went out driving with him in his smart high stanhope—the envy, and, let us hope, admiration of all the maids and matrons in the place. Major Percival's friend had placed his turn-out at his disposal, with its high-stepping horses and gaudy syces; and every evening, as I have said before, we drove about Mulkapore in state—that highly interesting spectacle, an "engaged couple." We did not indulge in much conversation, as my partner was a wretched whip, and mortally afraid of our borrowed steeds.

All his mind was on the stretch on their behalf; all his thoughts anxiously bent on steering them triumphantly in and out among the various vehicles we met, and they were many. Only for the swagger of the thing, he would have infinitely preferred taking me for a *walk*; but to be seen on foot in Mulkapore meant social extinction, no more and no less. At least three times a week we embellished the bandstand in the public gardens. Our carriage safely anchored, with a syce squatting in front of either horse, my companion, temporarily relieved from the mental agony his coaching efforts entailed, would, so to speak, preen himself, adjust his glass, and look leisurely round, discharging magnificent bows in various directions. He was un-

doubtedly a great man at Mulkapore ; a far more brilliant star than on the hills, where his light had been only one of a large constellation. Here he had the hemisphere entirely to himself, and was complacently aware of the fact.

He generally sauntered over to Mrs. St. Ubes's landau, and exchanged a few ideas with her. Sometimes he lingered for a considerable time, and I did not grudge his society to Mrs. St. Ubes. On the contrary, I was glad to see him so well amused. I was not always a very brilliant companion ; and somehow our conversation was often a laborious up-hill task—to *me*, at any rate. In spite of our mutual taste for botany and music, we had no tender confidences nor reciprocal outpourings to make to each other, like other happy lovers. Our present feelings and future hopes we never touched upon. People's dress and looks, society anecdotes, the weather, the shape of my new hat, and the state of Major Percival's liver, formed our most usual topics. I could see that Mrs. St. Ubes used all her fascinations to keep my cavalier literally at her chariot-wheels. Often when he was on the eve of taking his leave she detained him with one more little scandal, just one more piquant jest.

Each evening his visits were imperceptibly prolonged, till at last they reached to half an hour ; and, as my companion returned to his vacant seat, he was often accompanied by a look of open malicious triumph from the lady, who was evidently pleased to consider herself my rival. But I was not the least bit jealous ; I did not care for my *fiancé* sufficiently to be a prey to the agonising attacks of the green-eyed one. Major Percival did not dance at the various "afternoons" and small dances we attended. He was an invariable wallflower, not lounging in doorways, not enthroned among the chaperons but a very pleasantly planted flower, sharing a sofa with Mrs. St. Ubes, sunning himself in her smiles, and making pungent remarks on the company behind the wide expanse of her gigantic black fan. And here again I was not in the least jealous ; his companion searched in vain for a trace of vexation in my countenance when I occasionally came up to talk to them between the dances, escorted by a recent partner. Major Percival would sometimes say, half apologetically, "You do

your share of dancing and mine too, Nora ; it really does me good to see you enjoying yourself so much." But I imagine that he had even a nearer source of enjoyment than my dancing, in Mrs. St. Ubes's low murmurs and eloquent dark eyes.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### MRS. ST. UBES BRINGS US SOME NEWS.

Yet the first bringer of unwelcome news  
Hath but a losing office ; and his tongue  
Sounds ever after as a sullen bell,  
Remembered—knolling a departed friend.

ONE morning our party at chotah-hazree was unexpectedly reinforced by Mrs. St. Ubes and Colonel Gore, who rode into the compound just as we were sitting down to table. Mrs. St. Ubes was in exuberant spirits ; she beamed on everyone (Major Percival especially) as she drew off her gloves and helped herself to a piece of buttered toast. I knew by her air of supreme satisfaction that she had something unpleasant to say, and my augury proved perfectly correct. For a time, an afternoon dance the previous day was the only topic discussed, and Mrs. St. Ubes, seated between uncle and Major Percival, was, as usual, pitiless in her criticisms. Two unfortunately stout young ladies were cruelly dissected. "They were in themselves," she declared, "amply sufficient to make up a set of sixteen Lancers, there being sufficient substance in each for at least four couples. If I were them I would starve myself sooner than attain such elephantine proportions ; and it is positively wicked to allow them to ride. Where is the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals ? where are the police ? It is really melancholy to see two young women of such monstrous dimensions."

"I do not think they are so particularly stout," said auntie apologetically ; "at any rate, their handsome faces go a long way towards redeeming their figures."

"An acute and ill-regulated love-affair might have a happy effect. Love is a very thinning malady," remarked Colonel Gore plaintively.

"Hardly worth while to break their hearts for the sake of their figures," observed Mrs. Vane in her usual off-hand manner.

"Talking of broken hearts," exclaimed Mrs. St. Ubes, addressing herself pointedly to me, and accompanying her remark with a steady significant stare, "I had a letter from Florry Thompson, yesterday. She is at Cheetapore, you know."

"Is—she? I did not know," I returned indifferently.

"Captain Beresford is there too," she pursued, with an emphasis that was downright rude.

"Is he?" I again answered; but this time my face was a beautiful flame colour.

"*He* has quite got over his unlucky love-affair. Men are all the same—easily consoled!"

Still directing her remarks remorselessly to me.

"You will be glad to hear that he has made a miraculous recovery, and is engaged to the General's daughter, Miss Ross. But, of course, you have already heard the news."

This little conversational bomb had quite the intended effect. It produced an awkward and embarrassed pause. Auntie upset the sugar basin, uncle scowled at me, and I became of a still deeper and finer shade of crimson.

"An A 1 polo player and good-looking fellow, Beresford," ejaculated Colonel Gore reflectively.

"Is he not?" returned Mrs. St. Ubes; "but Florry Thompson says he is greatly altered, and has become quite thin and haggard-looking."

"Then I suppose I am to infer that he has had a love-affair, and been taking a trial of the prescription recommended for the Misses Parr?" observed Major Percival, with all the innocence of ignorance.

"Oh yes; he has had a very severe attack," returned Mrs. St. Ubes; "he was desperately in love with a certain young lady"—looking sweetly at me—"and she threw him over—at any rate, gave him his 'jawab' most effectually. But Nora can tell you all about it far better than I can, can't you, dear? You were in the secret."

What had I ever done to Mrs. St. Ubes, that she

should put me to torture in this manner, and hold me up to public shame? For my tell-tale face was an ample explanation to anyone. "Those who ran might read."

"Nora is a capital person for keeping a *secret*," observed Mrs. Vane, coming to my rescue; "and if Captain Beresford has confided in her his secret is perfectly safe; she will never divulge it to mortal. By-the-way, Mrs. St. Ubes, is it true that you are going home this hot weather?"

"Yes, thank goodness! You can't imagine how glad I am; how charmed I shall be when I see the last of this hateful country!"

"Hateful country!" echoed auntie. "Why I always thought you liked it so much."

"My dear Mrs. Neville! how could you imagine any such thing? I *loathe* the very name of India. It has nothing but disagreeable associations for me."

"Really, I am surprised to hear you say so," put in Mrs. Vane (between whom and Mrs. St. Ubes a kind of brilliant guerilla warfare raged), with a simple smile. "I always understood that you were born, brought up, and married out here."

"Plenty of people are born in India and hate the country. You may be born in a pigsty, but it does not follow that you are a pig."

"No, not always," responded Mrs. Vane, as if somewhat dubious, or only half convinced.

"Well, I must say that *I* like India," said uncle, rubbing his hands cheerfully, "although I was not born out here."

"Oh, you are a regular old Anglo-Indian," returned Mrs. St. Ubes contemptuously. "You have been out here so long, that you have forgotten what Europe is like."

"Pardon me, I do nothing of the kind. I have a soft corner for my native land; but, all the same, in my opinion, the gorgeous East is not half a bad billet. In the first place I commend to your notice the rupees——"

"What rupees can compensate for being broiled alive?"



"Well, in these days of punkah, ice machines, therm-antidotes, and hill stations, I do not think there is so much to complain of," said uncle firmly. "Can any European climate surpass the hills? And why should the natives of foggy England, frosty Scotland, and rainy Ireland be so excessively fastidious? Then look at our scenery," waving his hand towards our sandy avenue; "what a field for painters and artists! and for sportsmen, what a country!"—waxing enthusiastic—"large and small game, from an elephant to a snipe, from a bison to a quail, and no game-laws to speak of!"

"Oh! if you are going to talk shikar, I have no chance, and I shall go," said Mrs. St. Ubes, making a feint of searching for her whip and gloves.

"Well, shikar has no charms for ladies; but it has very great attractions for most *men*. However, you, my fair friends, have every reason to speak well of India also. You are social divinities out here. Queens of society, with nothing to do but dress, and dance, and flirt, and receive universal attention."

"I don't agree with you at all. I for one deny that we are one bit more thought of than we are in England," returned Mrs. St. Ubes, sharply. "And, at any rate, you must admit that your beloved India is the hot-bed of scandal and gossip," she concluded triumphantly.

"Not a bit worse than its neighbours," said Mrs. Vane, metaphorically seizing a weapon and striking into the conversation. "Take any small country town. Take an English colony abroad, you will find gossip and scandal just as rampant, nay worse. I don't attempt to deny that there are wicked people in India as well as elsewhere. There are mischief-makers and snakes in the grass in every country," she concluded, looking fixedly at Mrs. St. Ubes.

"Well, I must say that I think people get on together out here capitally. They are more drawn towards each other than at home," remarked auntie good-humouredly. "Look at the wonderful kindness and hospitality one meets with. Why in this large station there is not *one* hotel, none being required. Anglo-Indians have some good points you will allow?"

"I allow that India has very eloquent defenders, and very fine foliage plants, and that you have a superb collec-

tion, Mrs. Neville. Come, Major Percival," said Mrs. St. Ubes, rising, "come, and I will introduce you to Mrs. Neville's black caladiums. You are nearly as great a fern maniac as I am myself."

"Always at Mrs. St. Ubes's service," he replied, bowing with an air of great gallantry and escorting her towards the garden with deferential alacrity.

The party thus broken up dispersed, leaving Mrs. Vane *tête-à-tête* with me.

"She scored off you this morning, Nora," said my companion, nodding towards me impressively as she stood up and shook some crumbs out of her pretty crewel apron. "She came here on purpose to fire that shot about Maurice Boresford, and it certainly went home. My poor child, can you not learn to control your blushes?—they almost amount to a *disease* in your case. Mrs. Stubbs is now employing that wicked little tongue of hers in retailing all your miserable peccadilloes to Major P. Ere this he is quite *au fait* with your dearest secrets, and has the history, revised and enlarged, of your flirtation with Maurice at his fingers' ends."

The same day after tiffin Major Percival and I had the drawing-room to ourselves, with the exception of Boysie Towers, who was lying flat on the floor, supporting his head on his hands, and deep in "Gulliver's Travels." I was well accustomed to Boysie, and he was no more restraint on Major Percival's conversation than if he had been a dog.

My *fiancé* was lazily turning over auntie's large photographic album, and making remarks on its contents *en passant*. "Nice little woman, Mrs. St. Ubes," he remarked, leaning back in his chair and half-closing the book. "Very agreeable and lots to say for herself," shutting his eyes and enjoying some delicious retrospect. After a pause he lifted his eyelids suddenly and said, "a great friend of yours too, Nora, she tells me."

"Oh dear no," I answered brusquely.

"Well, she certainly *said* so, at any rate."

"Then she told you a great fib," I returned hotly.

"Well, never mind, my little Nora, you need not be so excited. I am sure Mrs. St. Ubes is the last person in the world to thrust her friendship upon anyone. I see how it is, she is a bit of a coquette, and you are in the same line

yourself, eh?" pausing again and regarding me complacently; "she says—she tells me"—and he hesitated.

"Well, what am I, according to Mrs. St. Ubes?"

"The greatest flirt in Mulkapore," he returned, with provokingly distinct utterance.

"Story number two," I replied scornfully.

"Well, at any rate you are credited with a vast number of proposals. Come, make me your confidant; confession is good for the soul," hitching his armchair closer to mine.

"Not in *this* case," I answered, with a laugh. "I shall not satisfy your curiosity. Suppose you go on looking at the photographs; you have not seen half. You should not listen to gossip."

"But you had half-a-dozen proposals, Nora. I'm not at all jealous. I admire their discrimination, and am sorry for your rejected admirers."

I could see that he was rather proud of my victims; he considered that they adorned *his* chariot-wheels, he having carried off the conqueror of the slain.

It was of no use begging or coaxing, I would not confess, so he resumed his occupation of acting the part of critic to all our friends and acquaintances. Most of them fared but ill at his hands, till he came to Maurice—Maurice taken in half-length cabinet size, and in all the glory of his uniform. I would fain have skipped him; but Major Percival interposed a firm white finger, and gazed at the photograph critically.

"Now that's what I call a thoroughbred-looking fellow," he observed impressively, as if the original had now received a kind of honourable mention, a *cachet* that would distinguish him for the rest of his life. "Who is he? Don't know his face."

"He is Captain Beresford—my cousin," I answered, with all the composure I could assume.

"Oh, indeed. He was rather *épris*, was he not? One of the victims. Come, come, my little Nora, your face tells the tale your tongue refuses to utter."

"What *tale*?" cried Boysie, aroused by the magic word and walking on his knees to Major Percival's side. "Oh, that's Captain Beresford, Nora's other sweetheart! Awfully spoony on her—he was!"

"Boysie, how dare you say so?" I cried with cheeks like flame.

"I heard mother say that he was in *love* with you, so there!" retorted the imp, flogging his arms and glaring at me defiantly; "and it's true, *too*! I saw you myself, that night at the picnic—shall I tell? Do you *dare* me?" continued this malignant urchin, looking at me with his head on one side, and an air of keen, malicious enquiry.

"Tell what you please; it is all the same to me," I answered recklessly. "You have nothing to repeat about me, or—or—Captain Beresford, that is of the smallest consequence!"

An impudent closing of his left eye was the only response Boysie vouchsafed, and leaning heavily on Major Percival's knee, he raised himself to an upright position, yawned, stretched, picked up Gulliver, and then found speech.

"Never mind. I was only taking a rise out of you, old girl. Keep yourself cool! Your auntie is making some cocoa-nut rock. I wonder if it is nearly ready. I think I'll go and see."

So saying, Master Boysie, having made a frightful face behind Major Percival's back, put his book under his arm and lounged out of the room.

The purdah had scarcely swung behind him ere Major Percival confronted me, standing erect with thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"Now, Nora," he said impressively, "I must insist on knowing what he means! I allude to the little beast who has just left. I insist upon some explanation," he added with a solemnity that was absolutely tragic.

"What he said was perfectly true," I faltered, gazing intently at a certain pattern in a Persian rug. "I treated my cousin very badly—I never told him that I was engaged to you until—until too late," I stammered.

"Too late? What do you mean?" very sharply.

"I mean he proposed to me. I——"

"Ah, and you refused him. Yes, I have heard all that," put in my auditor almost cheerfully. "You refused half-a-dozen, if all tales be true; but you did not encourage him, did you—eh, Nora?"

"I believe I did, Major Percival. You shall hear the truth. I encouraged him, as you call it, but at first quite

unconsciously. I always meant to tell him I was engaged to you, and somehow I put it off, and put it off, and all the time he was thinking that I was free, and that—and that—I liked him. He will never, never forgive me, and I shall never forgive myself." I added in a whisper, conveying the idea of mental sackcloth and ashes.

"It was certainly a great mistake," pleased with my humility; "you ought to have let him know that the—shall we say 'admiration?'—was not mutual whenever you saw that his devotion was becoming too flagrant. I suppose his disenchantment is now quite complete?" asked Major Percival suspiciously.

"Quite, quite complete, most thoroughly complete!" I promptly answered.

"Well, well, then if I grant you forgiveness and absolution for your little flirtation, I am sure *he* may. We will say no more about it," he added reassuringly, "only be more guarded in future. Do not ensnare any more of these good-looking gunners," concluded my *fiancé*, nodding his head impressively as he turned to a pier-glass, and began a most critical scrutiny of his left—his favourite whisker.

Having satisfied himself that he had *not* seen a gray hair, and that his tie, collar, and *tout ensemble* were entirely to his satisfaction, he took up his hat and gloves, and with an easy farewell to me set off to join a whist party at the Club. Hardly had he left the house when Boysie came stepping into the room on tip-toe, a large lump of cocoa-nut rock in either hand, and a general stickiness pervading his appearance.

"Well, has the old fellow gone?" enquired this artless juvenile. "Yes, there he goes," he added, "and good riddance of rubbish! I say, Nora, wasn't I a brick, eh? What are you going to give me for not letting the cat out of the bag? and such a thundering big puss!"

"Cat! Puss!" I echoed crossly; "what do you mean? Has softening of the brain set in at last?"

"You remember the night of the picnic to the tombs?"

I nodded. Had I not good reason to recollect it?

"Well," putting a huge morsel of rock into his mouth, and buttonholing me by his now free and most uninviting fingers, "I was strolling about before supper, and I came

to the big pool, and I looked over the edge, and what do you think I saw?" accompanying the question with a diabolical wink.

I turned perfectly cold.

"Why, that fellow Maurice Beresford, with his arm round your waist. *Now!*"

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### I DECLINE A DOWER.

Get money : still get money,  
No matter by what means.—*Ben Jonson.*

TIME passed very slowly. Major Percival had been nearly a month at Mulkapore, and it seemed to me as if it had been *years*. Love certainly did *not* “chase the hours with flying feet.” One evening, as I and my betrothed were sitting alone in the drawing-room, he suddenly drew his chair close up to mine, and said in a low confidential tone, and with a certain infusion of sentiment in his manner: “Nora, I have been having a most interesting conversation with your aunt.”

“Have you?” I replied absently; endeavouring to thread my needle, and struggling with a small eye.

“Yes; we have been talking about the wedding—*our* wedding, you know,” with a smiling nod. “What would you think of saying this day two months, ‘I shall be Mrs. Percival?’”

“This day two months!” I almost shrieked, holding my crewel-work in one hand and needle in the other, and staring at him blankly. “Two months; you *mean* two years!”

“Not at all. I mean two months,” he replied, with impressive legato utterance.

“But you promised that it was to be a long engagement, and I mean to keep you to your word,” I answered firmly. “You like your liberty, and I like mine. Don’t let us think of getting married for ages. We get on admirably as we are at present,” I continued with nervous volubility.

“This is sheer nonsense, Nora,” he returned impatiently; “we have already been engaged seven months——”

“And what of that?” I cried eagerly, “I’ve often heard of people being engaged for seven years.”

"Paupers," he observed trenchantly, and with an air of lofty superiority; "people who can't afford to marry have to wait, but happily this is not our case. I am going to Simla next hot weather, and I mean to be pointed out as the husband of the beautiful Mrs. Percival," he concluded, with a complacent smile.

"So you may, but *I* am not going to Simla next hot season," I answered with disconcerting frankness.

"Well, well, *nous verrons*; I'll have another talk with your aunt. I suppose it is on the strength of being an heiress that you are giving yourself all these little airs?" he asked playfully.

"An heiress?" I exclaimed, "you know very well that I have not a penny in the world."

"Have you not?" he returned, with a most satisfied smile, drawing his whiskers through his fingers—a token of intense good humour; "there are a good many pennies in five hundred a year."

"You must be joking; where in the world would I get five hundred a year?" I asked, with vast incredulity in face and voice.

"Your cousin, Captain Beresford, has come forward very generously, and settled that amount on you and your heirs for ever. I had a most satisfactory letter from his solicitors last week; you are actually in possession of that sum *now*," he concluded, looking at me with a glance that showed that my charms had been considerably enhanced in *his* opinion.

"But I shall not touch a penny of it; not a penny of it!" I cried excitedly, throwing down my work.

"Don't be a quixotic little goose, Nora," returned my companion soothingly; "your nice unexpected *dot* comes in most *à propos*; for, although I shall some day have a large fortune, at present five hundred pounds a year is a very appreciable addition to my money-bags; I will accept it for you, if you have any scruples. You and I will both be one, so it is all the same."

"I shall never take it."

"There is no taking in the matter; it is already yours, as much as you are mine," seizing my hand with a sudden gush of affection, and kissing it effusively.

"Listen to me," I said, jumping up and snatching my



hand away; "Maurice cannot spare the money; he wants all he possesses to keep up the old place. I will never, *never* touch a farthing of his income; I have no right to it;" waving my hands violently about, and speaking with great excitement.

"But, my dear child, it is yours—yours absolutely; and your cousin, by all accounts, can spare it well."

"I shall return it at once; I will take steps in the matter to-morrow; uncle shall manage it."

"You are crazy to think of such a thing," returned Major Percival angrily. "Have you no thought for *my* interests? Am *I* not to be considered?" he added, in a voice trembling with indignation.

"I am thinking of doing what is right, without regard to anyone's interests. Knowing what I told you about my cousin, would *you* touch his money?" I asked passionately, standing before my future lord, and speaking with all the firmness I could control.

"Very well, very well, that will do; we won't go into the matter at present. Don't excite yourself; sit down; pray sit down, and keep cool," said my intended, with a shadow on his brow, and a great deal of annoyance reflected in his manner; "I am only sorry I mentioned the subject;" and leaning far back in his chair, and reaching for a neighbouring magazine, he effectually gave me to understand that he considered the subject for the present dismissed and done with, and the entrance of Mrs. Vane put an end to any further argument.

After breakfast next morning I had an interview with auntie, and told her, with all the vehemence I could assume—and that was a good deal—that I was not prepared to marry Major Percival in two months' time, and that, if he insisted on accepting a fortune from Maurice, I would not marry him *at all*.

On this point I was firm. My aunt endeavoured to talk me over, and was disposed to make an equal show of determination. But I would not be reasoned with. I declared that I would leave the matter in uncle's hands, and *here* I knew I had a staunch ally, and that he would certainly aid me to return Maurice's munificent gift. I was convinced that he would not care to see Maurice despoil himself in order to add to Major Percival's already well-

lined purse. I had my own way in the end. After various rather stormy interviews with uncle, during which a certain amount of "nasty" speeches were mutually interchanged, the money was paid over to uncle's account to be kept in trust of the Gallow estate. When the question was put to Major Percival point-blank, "Whether he would take me without the Beresford money or not *at all?*" of course in common politeness he was obliged to declare that I was a treasure in myself, and a valuable gift even empty-handed. So I carried my point in one way, but he was equally successful in another! As he had yielded, I was obliged to do likewise. Our wedding was fixed to take place after Easter. In vain I begged for "a long day." In vain I urged, remonstrated, entreated. Auntie was immovable; the question was quite settled. In two months' time I would be *Mrs. Percival*.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### MRS. VANE GIVES ME A PIECE OF HER MIND.

Exceedingly wise, fair-spoken, and persuading.—*Henry VIII.*

MRS. VANE and Major Percival did not coalesce, although their mutual dislike was decently veiled under a mask of conventional politeness ; there was an undercurrent in their conversation painfully perceptible to my experienced ear, and I was continually on thorns, lest one of her winged sarcasms or his pointed rejoinders would lead to an open rupture. It was not to be expected that a lady of Mrs. Vane's candid disposition would long leave me in the dark as to her opinion of my choice. One morning as we were arranging flowers in the dining-room, and making floral preparations for a grand dinner-party, she began with the abrupt question :

“ Well, and when is it to be ? ”

“ At eight o'clock sharp, as usual,” I returned demurely.

“ Stuff and nonsense, I'm not thinking of the dinner ; I am alluding to your wedding, my good girl ! ”

“ Oh, in two months' time, I believe,” I answered with ill-assumed composure, carefully sorting some choice roses from a large pile in front of me, without raising my eyes.

“ *Indeed !* Well, I shall not grace the ceremony. I am going down to meet George in Bombay next month.”

“ But you will come back, of course,” I asked anxiously.

“ No, my dear child, why should I come back ? It will give me no pleasure to see you married to Major Percival, Nora,” she continued, suddenly throwing down a handful of maidenhair and seating herself opposite to me, with her elbows on the table and her eyes fastened on my face and her chin in her hands. “ I suppose it has gone too far ; you could not get out of it *now*, could you ? ”

For all reply I paused with a jug of water in mid-air, and gazed at her in stupefied amazement.

"I wish you would tell me one thing before I go away. Why did you ever become engaged to Major Percival?"

"Why do people generally become engaged?" I answered vaguely, drawing a large *épergne* towards me, and filling in the upper part with some lovely feathery ferns.

"Whatever possessed you I cannot imagine," she went on irritably. "He is the type of all others I most detest—an egotistical, selfish, elderly dandy. He is a notorious flirt," reckoning on her fingers.

"So are you," I answered promptly.

"He is greedy!"

"So are most men, and many women."

"He is more than double your age."

"So is *your* husband," I responded triumphantly.

"Ah, very true, but they are as different as chalk from cheese! My George is a mere boy in comparison his heart is young."

"You have always been prejudiced against Major Percival, and have certainly been at no pains to conceal your opinion," I replied, an angry spot on either cheek.

"Well, no, I never can play the hypocrite!" she answered with cheerful complacency, "and I am often amazed at my own self-restraint, when I find myself in his company."

"I don't think you have much occasion to flatter yourself on *that* point," I answered sarcastically.

"His conversation has the effect of a rasp on my sensitive organisation; it is my—my—my, or I—I—I, all day long; and to see him in church, where perforce he is silent—one gaitered foot in the aisle, his chest well thrown forward, his hand behind his back, his glass in his eye, dispensing dignified patronage to his fellow-worshippers—Pharisee is stamped on him; it maddens me to see him!"

"I wish you would go on with your flowers, Violet," I observed impatiently, "and leave Major Percival alone. What a bitter little enemy you would be—a regular little wasp!"

"I must speak my mind, if I die for it, sometimes,"

she replied, picking out a few buds, and holding them up to her dainty nose. "I cannot think what you see in the great man, Nora. I know that his position, and his money, and his title weigh very little in your opinion. I sometimes fancy you must have accepted him to please your aunt. I know you do not love him. If you went down on your two bended knees and swore it to me, I would not believe you—so there!"

"Look here, Violet!" I exclaimed angrily, "I won't listen to any more of this. You have said too much as it is. It is very unkind of you to speak in this way—of—of—of—my future husband"—bringing out the word with an effort. "You can see no good in him, I know; but all the same, he is clever, agreeable, gentlemanly——"

"Of course, of course," she interrupted, putting up her hands; "and it is very proper of you to stand up for him and defend him. And now, shall I tell you, as I feel in the vein, why he is marrying you?" she proceeded, with redoubled animation.

"No, do not," I replied, with a gesture of appeal.

"He is carrying away the prize from various competitors," she proceeded unabashed. "This fact alone piques his overweening vanity. You are the 'pretty Miss Neville'; you had what he would call '*le succès fou*,' last season in the hills. He admires your beauty and style, and, once you are Mrs. P., he will start you as a professional. He is immensely vain of you; but he does not love you, no, not an atom. All his affections are entirely centred in himself."

"You are wrong, quite wrong," I interrupted hastily.

Mrs. Vane regarded me with unusually grave eyes, and then replied:

"Do you know that it gives me a very painful feeling to see you together: he so proudly complacent, so politely *empressé*, so graciously ready to be pleased; and you, so different to your real nature—cold, inanimate, and formal, so changed to what you used to be when Maurice Beresford was here."

It was well for me that the *épergne* was now fully clothed with flowers and ferns, and effectually screened my sudden blushes from Mrs. Vane's sharp eyes.

"One thing more I must and will say," she continued earnestly.

"Do not," I exclaimed impatiently, "for I warn you that we shall quarrel. I am at the end of my tether."

"My very last word," she persisted, standing up and looking at me undauntedly. "Should you ever change your mind—of which I have but little hope, for you have no self-assertion and no moral courage—come to me. When all Mulkapore is up in arms; when your auntie and uncle are beside themselves with indignation; when Major Percival has made a holocaust of your letters, and left you in a whirlpool of rage and disappointment—come, I say, to *me*, and I will be your ark. I warn you that, if you let things take their course, you will be a miserable girl, and I shall pity you from the very bottom of my heart."

"Keep your pity," I replied; "I don't think I shall require it," still presenting a bold front to this audacious little person.

"Don't you? You fancy that, Nora. Lady Rodcaster——"

"Who is talking of Lady Rodcaster?" said auntie, bustling into the room. "Oh, how lovely!" apostrophising my handiwork. "Good practice for the wedding *déjeuner*, eh, Violet? By-the-way, I must ask Jim to see about borrowing a durbar tent; this room will never hold half the people. What do you say, Nora?—not even with a horseshoe table."

I muttered some unintelligible reply, and snatching up a basket, escaped from the discussion, on the pretence of getting some more ferns.

But once out in the fernery I sat down on a piece of rock, with my basket at my feet, and gave myself entirely up to thought. I felt very indignant with Mrs. Vane for her outspokenness, the more so that I had a dim inward conviction that what she said was partly true. Love is proverbially blind, and I, not being in love, had no difficulty in seeing Major Percival's little shortcomings. I could not conceal from myself that he was egotistical, that he was shabby about money in little things, that he laid down the law in a manner that exasperated uncle to the very bounds of politeness; he was a hypochondriac too, and delivered daily bulletins as to the state of his health, and how he

had slept, and the condition past and present of his liver. What would have been exceedingly entertaining in anyone else I found quite intolerable in my future husband, and I already felt a guilty partnership with him when I intercepted one of uncle's sarcastic glances on its way to meet one of Mrs. Vane's malicious smiles. How different to Maurice, who had been badly wounded in the late war, and who never alluded in the most distant manner to his health or his exploits.

Major Percival was, I could see, extremely proud of me, of my singing, and my general appearance. He took the deepest interest in the condition of my voice, and the state of my complexion, and, if I were hoarse or sunburnt, was quite eloquently energetic in his remedies and remonstrances. To venture into the compound without gloves or veil was in his eyes little less than a crime.

All these unpleasant discoveries did not come to me at once, only by degrees. Week followed week very, very slowly; each as it ended brought me nearer and nearer to my wedding morning; and every day, as I rose, I dreaded the event more, and every day I liked my future husband less.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### MULKAPORE RACES.

But all was false and hollow,  
Though his tongue dropped manna,  
Could make the worse appear the better reason.

*Paradise Lost.*

WHETHER it was my persistent determination to remain a dowerless bride, or the very discernible loss of my good looks and my good spirits, I cannot tell, but certain it is that I noted a gradual but still perceptible change in Major Percival. Perhaps he thought that now, when the very day was named, and my future was in his hands altogether, there was no longer any necessity for various *petits soins* to which he had accustomed me; he ceased to be continually at my beck and call, and favoured Mrs. St. Ubes with a good deal of his society. For this I sincerely believe that I was, in a measure, to blame. At first he sought her company in order to pique me, and enjoy, as he doubtless imagined, the agreeable position of being a bone of contention between two pretty women. He would have liked to have seen his placid, grave *fiancée* a little disturbed by the demon jealousy. Mrs. St. Ubes always received him with effusion, and witnessed his departure with despair. I did neither the one nor the other. She told him anecdotes, and strained every nerve to amuse him; I did what was in my power to be a pleasant companion, but I had completely lost my spirits, and my fascinations fell far short of those that Mrs. St. Ubes could bring into play. He liked her society; it gave a flavour to his day. In short, I was the lamb, and she was the mint sauce; and he divided his



attention very agreeably between us both. She was not slow to take opportunity at the flood, and made the most of the hours my *fiancé* spent with her in depreciating me in every possible way (of course not openly), but under the veil of point-blank questions and delicate innuendoes. He generally returned from their *tête-à-tête* in a captious frame of mind, inclined to make unreasonable demands and snappy speeches. Mrs. St. Ubes had never forgiven me for "hooking him," as she elegantly expressed it. He had been her own special property, her best and most presentable "Bow-wow" till I had come upon the scene and carried him off. If she saw any prospect of turning the tables on me, she was the last woman in the world to lose it. From what I have since heard, she insidiously implanted a firm conviction in his breast that I did not half appreciate the elevated position in store for me. She inferred that he was throwing himself away, and thereby breaking the hearts of his most devoted friends, herself most notably. The races, the great yearly event at Mulkapore, were shortly coming off, and Major Percival stayed on in order to attend them. He intended, contrary to his first arrangement, to remain at Mulkapore until he was married. Meanwhile his marked attention to Mrs. St. Ubes was the theme of every tongue. But, of course, our ears were the last to hear of it. However, one day Mrs. Gower considered it her *duty* to come and speak to auntie—in quite a friendly spirit of course—and put her on her guard against that most dangerous woman, Mrs. Stubbs.

"She is getting herself most fearfully talked about, my dear Mrs. Neville; and she makes no secret of her admiration for Major P."

Bending towards auntie, and speaking with a mysterious *hiss*, she said :

"Do you know that he tiffins with her three times a week, and every night, after leaving here, he finishes the evening in her society, sitting in the veranda and smoking cigarettes till all hours."

"But Mrs. St. Ubes is an old friend," faltered auntie, casting wildly about for any excuse.

"So much the worse," retorted Mrs. Gower in a highly acidulated tone. "Keep your eyes open, my dear lady.

You don't know the woman you have to cope with ; and as to Major Percival, he is a weak-minded fool. You had better just give him a gentle hint that this kind of thing won't do for an engaged man."

I could see that auntie was uneasy, and uncle at boiling-point ; I myself was by far the most unconcerned of the family. I was fated to marry Major Percival. Nothing could save me ; and perhaps marriage would be a panacea for all my woes, or act as a draught of Lethe to my too retentive memory. Once married, I would begin a new life. Loveless, no doubt ; but still full of new interests and duties. I would be carried away to other scenes and other friends, and surely once married I could no longer think of Maurice Beresford. I actually believed that there was some virtue in the ceremony that would expunge him for ever from my heart and thoughts.

I flatter myself that our races at Mulkapore were the Ascot of India. Where was there such another meeting so rich in stakes, so widely, so universally attended ? The races last five days, taking place on alternate ones, so they spread over nearly a whole fortnight ; on by-days we had long morning rides, breakfast-parties at the minister's palace in the city, or hunting with cheetahs, and a *déjeuner* at his palace in the country ; he gave lunches, banquets, and entertainments of various kinds with his more than princely hospitality. We had also dances and dinners at the Residency ; ladies' dinners at the different camps in the neighbourhood of the stand ; and altogether the time of the races was the very zenith of our Mulkapore season. At three o'clock every other afternoon the stand was crowded, and let me tell you that we could muster a goodly show of pretty frocks and pretty faces. The upper part was devoted to the prince and his court and certain of the notable Europeans ; a few steps lower came the most expensive seats, and every flight you came down you became cheaper. The stand was built of stone, and was a fine new structure with imposing flights of shallow stone stairs going down either side, and from which you entered the various tiers.

The first two days' racing were not specially eventful, and any way the races had but little interest for me as I

sat beside Mrs. Vane at a front corner of the upper tier, mechanically criticising horses, jockeys, and people's dress. My intended having driven me down to the course at the utmost peril of my life, procured me a chair, and handed me a correct card, considered his duty accomplished, and proceeded to sport from flower to flower, like the gay elderly butterfly that he was. He generally "settled" down beside Mrs. St. Ubes, who sat in a line with me in a commanding position in the middle of the front row. I could easily observe her pathetic, interested looks, her upturned eyes, and the honeyed sweetness of her smile; the assiduous attentions of my betrothed were not lost upon me either; he held her gloves, glasses, marked her card, sustained her umbrella, and cloaked and uncloaked her with solicitous devotion.

"Look here," she said to me exultantly the previous race day, "I have won eighteen dozen pairs of long-buttoned gloves, and four gold bangles—I declare I shall have to set up a shop. I can let you have some of them half-price, for I never could wear them all; only, by-the-way, I forgot your hand is a good deal bigger than my little paw," patting it complacently. "Five dozen pairs from Major Percival, and two gold bangles. Was it not reckless of him—and he an engaged man? I told him," tapping him playfully with her fan, "that he had no business to bet with me, that you would give him such a scolding; but he would not be advised. You won't be very cross with him, dear, will you?" looking at me pleadingly. "You won't be angry?"

"Of course not—why should I?" I asked bluntly.

"That's all right then," she replied with a gracious nod, as she turned away and passed down to her carriage on Major Percival's arm. I gazed after her as she floated downstairs, whispering and smiling, and looking up into his face. Certainly she was a very pretty woman, and looked in the best of health and spirits; a pale blue silk costume fitting her like a glove, with bonnet, fan, parasol, and shoes to correspond, became her admirably. Her colour, eyes, and expression betokened the triumphant conviction that she was the prettiest woman on the stand that day; and very likely she was quite right. I, in a simple Indian muslin and white plush hat, could not compete with her brilliant

toilet, nor could my pale cheeks and sunken eyes compare to her radiant good-looks. I was not surprised to hear two ladies in the crowd behind me whisper, "Is that the beauty—the lovely Miss Neville?" Evidently an assent was given. "Oh my! Why, she is not a bit good-looking." What rubbish people talk about her; she is like a ghost!"

It was somewhat difficult to arouse my jealousy, as Mrs. St. Ubes was provoked to find; but Major Percival was of a much more inflammable description, as you shall hear. The third day of the races is called the big day, as the most important events come off then, notably the "Arab Derby," a much coveted prize. Mrs. Vane had descended to a lower tier to see some friends, and many people had flocked down to promenade, to drink tea, or to put in tickets in the *pari mutuel* for the grand race of the day.

I did not want any tea, I did not want to take any tickets, nor to go and have a chat with the Browns from Cheetapore; no, I only wanted to be left alone, so I stayed behind, sitting in solitary state at the end or angle of the stand, my head resting on my hand, gazing with a vacant eye on the dense throng below—the crowds of gay native spectators lining the course, the accomplished native riders, who were urging their horses into upright bounds into the air, and commanding the admiration of the populace; at the plain, and the palms beyond, and the far away peaceful-looking blue hills.

About thirty or forty people still remained in our part of the stand, scattered about in groups of twos and threes—chiefly twos. Nearest to me sat Mrs. St. Ubes, gorgeous in old gold, satin, and a ruby velvet coat with steel buttons. She was leaning back in her chair, slowly eating an ice, whilst Major Percival held her gloves and fan. To do Major Percival justice, I had also been offered an ice, and every refreshment that the establishment afforded, but I had declined them all. I hated ices, I hated races, I hated everything.

What is the sense—which we all possess—that tells us, even though our face be turned in an opposite direction, that another person's eyes are regarding us long and steadily? I became aware of the fact, as I sat with my

face bent on the distant horizon, and, turning half round, I beheld—*Maurice!* Maurice standing above me, on the steps leading into the stewards' stand, and looking down on me with an air of grave, critical scrutiny. I sat as it were galvanised, staring at him with the blankest and most bewildered astonishment. Was it Maurice, or someone who was very like him? He was in complete racing garb; he wore an orange cap, a light gray overcoat, which was open in front and revealed breeches, boots, and a blue satin jacket, and carried a heavy whip in his hand. Of course it was Maurice; who else could it be? my common sense demanded. I at once became ruddier, oh, far ruddier than the traditional cherry, and ventured a distant deprecating little bow, which he acknowledged by formally removing his jockey-cap. He looked graver than usual, but otherwise his appearance was by no means as altered and emaciated as I had been led to expect. Our mutual recognition accomplished, his eye was suddenly arrested by Mrs. St. Ubes and her cavalier. I could see a certain amount of surprise—unwelcome surprise—overshadow his face. He gazed at them with a mixture of puzzled amazement and dislike—yes, certainly dislike—and then bestowed one last glance on me. He seemed to stand above me, a kind of judge—a sort of avenging fate—as with one look of pure and unadulterated compassion he turned away and sprang down the steps.

Maurice's pity! This was hard to bear, the very last drop in my overflowing cup.

I had hardly realised that I had seen him, had barely collected my scattered ideas, when Mrs. Vane and all our party returned to their places, all excitement and eagerness anent the forthcoming great race. Mrs. Vane looked strangely agitated. As she slipped into her seat beside me she whispered breathlessly:

"Guess whom I have seen and spoken to?"

"I know," I faltered with averted face.

"You *don't* mean to say that he came up and spoke to you?" she gasped incredulously.

"No, no," I answered, "he only stood at the top of the steps and looked down."

"Ah, well, I came face to face with him on the stairs. I never got such a start in my life; he told me that he

and General Ross arrived last night, and are staying out in the Artillery camp. The General is a great racing man, and wants to have a shot at the 'Arab Derby,' and has brought up a horse called 'Paladin.' But they are going back by the early train to-morrow. He asked where he was likely to see your uncle. I told him on the stewards' stand, and I suppose that is what brought him up here."

"The horses are coming out," said Major Percival, lounging over, card in hand. "What is your fancy, Mrs. Vane? there are eleven starters; quite a big field. Which will you take, odd or even? 'Tamerlane' and 'Star of India' are the favourites."

"Well, I'll take the odds," replied Mrs. Vane, ticking off her six horses on her card. "I hope 'Paladin' will win. He is the only one I'm interested in."

"Oh—eh," referring to his own. "General Ross's horse! who is riding him? There he is coming past the stand now—blue and orange colours."

"That's Beresford, his A.D.C.," put in a man who was standing behind. "Rather a convenient sort of A.D.C. for a racing man. Beresford's a rattling good rider, and I should not be one bit surprised if he pulled off the race, although 'Paladin' is carrying nine stone seven, rather a top weight. He won the Bedouin Stakes at Cheetapore. Still I fancy him more than 'Mooltan' at eight stone five."

"*Your* Beresford, I presume," said Major Percival, bending down and whispering in a smothered tone. "Is this an agreeable surprise, or was it a previous arrangement?"

I think the look I bestowed on my betrothed frightened him, for he added in a half-apologetic tone and with a kind of society smile:

"Never mind; I was only joking. Are you inclined to have a bet on the race?"

"No, thank you. I never bet, as you know," I answered stiffly.

"Won't you make an exception in this case, and back 'Paladin?'" he added, with a sneer.

"Of course she will," put in Mrs. St. Ubes, as she joined us. "What can you be thinking of?—your

cousin's mount!—you must back him in this, and also in the hurdle-race; he is riding 'Tom Fool.'"

Thus driven to bay, I made a stand.

"As you are so very anxious that I should bet on this horse I will, but not in gloves, Major Percival, gloves are too common; let us make the wager worthy of the horse and its rider."

Here Major Percival became positively purple, but a worm *will* turn!

"I will stake my big ruby ring that uncle got from Mandalay against your diamond solitaire stud."

Now, the diamond solitaire was the apple of his eye. There was no time for higgling or haggling, the horses were already at the post, so all he could say was: "Very well, whoever wins, it will still be in the family."

"Do not be so sure of that," I answered; "if the stud becomes mine I dare say I shall find an owner for it."

So saying, I turned and gave my whole attention to the race. The course was a long oval, and every inch of it was visible from the stand. The distance to be run was three miles, and the horses had to pass us twice. I kept my eyes levelled on the bay with the blue colours, and he was in a good middle position in the first round, neither first nor last. I glanced involuntarily at the surrounding spectators. What faces I beheld—strained eagerness, agonised disappointment, breathless expectation. Coming into the straight the second round, there were only three in the race, a chestnut, a gray, and a bay. The bay was 'Paladin.' As they commenced the descent "Paladin" quitted the society of his companions; and although they followed up in hot pursuit he shook them off with apparent ease, and won the much-coveted "Arab Derby" by three lengths, and the solitaire was mine.

There was an immense amount of excitement and cheering, and General Ross's face was a picture as he led his winner into the paddock. I fancied that Maurice cast one hurried glance at our part of the stand—it may have been fancy—but if so, he must have been edified to have seen my future lord and I standing and looking down on the general enthusiasm side by side. He rode again that

day, in the hurdle-race, and won it by sheer riding, just getting "Tom Fool's" nose first past the post. Thus he made himself a person of some consequence and interest among the spectators on the stand; and I happened to hear a conversation about him, carried on by the people who occupied chairs directly behind ours—two gentlemen, from an up-country station, slight acquaintances of ours.

"That fellow Beresford is worth his weight in gold to old Ross; and I hear he bought in both horses in the lotteries. 'Tom Fool' went for nothing."

"On account of his riding you mean. Yes, I believe he selected him partly with a view to this sort of thing," indicating the course before him; "but Beresford is a smart officer too."

"Ah! and he is going to be his son-in-law into the bargain. Beresford has money," significantly.

"Oh! I don't think there is any truth in that. He is not a marrying man; and as to his money, I fancy it is derived from Irish rents, and he has more gold on his uniform than in his pockets!"

"He may not have been a marrying man some time ago; but let me tell you, my dear sir, that there is a great deal in propinquity; and Beresford has not been living in the house with Miss Ross this last six months for nothing. She's an uncommon fine girl, I can tell you."

"Ah," replied the other irritably, "I hate fine girls; they are another word for fat girls."

"Nothing of the kind," returned his companion argumentatively. "A tall well-made girl——"

No doubt the discussion was pursued for the next hour, but at this juncture auntie came and swept us all away; and I went home with a heavy heart and what is called a "nervous" headache.

Much against my will I went to the Residency ball that night, looking truly like a ghost. The lilies in my enormous bouquet—Major Percival's gift—were not whiter than my face. I pleaded fatigue as an immunity from dancing, and sat out dance after dance with my intended, who had suddenly become both exacting and suspicious, and refused to let me for a single instant out of his sight. Indeed he preferred my society for once to that of Mrs. St. Ubes, and



spent the entire evening sitting beside me, promenading with me, dancing square dances with me, administering ices and tea; and I—I was watching the door, half in a frenzy of fear, half in an agony of anxious expectation. I might have spared myself all anxiety—he never came.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

To be, or not to be, that is the question :  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?—*Hamlet*.

FOR some time after Mrs. Vane's departure I missed her dreadfully, I had no one to whom I could open my heart, and my mind was in a state of miserable confusion. What had possessed me to accept Major Percival? was a question I was asking myself by night and by day. What infatuation had seized upon me? Was it right to marry a man that I did not love—nay, that I could barely tolerate? Would it not be the truest kindness to break off the match before too late? (lending myself readily enough now to Miss Gibbon's views on a similar occasion.) I had hinted to auntie, and hinted in vain; at the very faintest suspicion of my drift she had become ice. There was no hope to be had from her, nor from uncle. My fickleness was notorious, it would be all the same to whoever I was engaged; I had gained a reputation as a flirt that was positively unique. The Globe-trotter, Major Dillon, poor Dicky Campbell, and Maurice—and now Major Percival was to share their fate, and go by the board as well.

With my aunt's sanction—*never!* This match was for my good, and although I appeared indifferent to my own interests, she was *not*. It was for my happiness; and when people think they have your welfare in view how firm they can be! Auntie was adamant. I turned to uncle; he was pitiless as Fate. As a last resource I applied to Major Percival, feeling my way with a few vague little generalities and distant allusions, then broad hints; but all were alike

ineffectual. I might just as well have been hinting to one of the elephants in the heavy battery for all the effect I produced. It never dawned on his mind that any poor girl in her senses could possibly wish to revoke her engagement with *him*. Nothing remained for me but to put the matter nakedly before him, and many and many an hour I lay awake, turning over in my mind how I was to break the news—rehearsing what I would say—what he would say—and, grand finale, what everyone would say. I had little or no moral courage; vainly—vainly did I make good resolutions; but at last one day a splendid opportunity forced itself before me, and I felt bound not to let it escape. We were alone in the plant-house, my *fiancé* and myself. The said plant-house was a large, circular construction, built of bamboos, with a lofty pointed roof—the “Zulu house,” Maurice used to call it; inside it was a splendid collection of cool-looking green plants. A picturesque fernery occupied the centre, and round the sides were banks of rock, covered with ferns, caladiums, foliage plants—large-leaved and shady. It afforded a most delightful contrast to the yellow glare of the sun on the sand outside. Major Percival, clad (even to his boots) in spotless white, save for an easy-looking buff silk coat, out of the breast-pocket of which peeped an exquisite handkerchief redolent of white roses. Even at this early hour his appearance was evidently the result of the most studied care. Eye-glass in eye he was condescendingly visiting plant after plant, dusting off minute insects and atoms of dust with his aristocratic fingers. I felt that the moment had come, as with a violent effort, I brought up my courage to the sticking point. “You must and *shall* speak,” I said to myself with unwonted determination, drawing off my magnificent diamond and sapphire ring and holding it in the hollow of a cold and trembling hand. Suddenly my companion jerked his eye-glass out of his eye, straightened his back, and turned round and confronted me.

“You are looking uncommonly well this morning, Nora,” he said, gazing at me approvingly. “Nothing suits you so well as white. In your white gown, with this green background, you look—like—let me see—like one of those lilies we used to see up in the hills. You are paler than

you used to be," he added reflectively, rolling a cigarette between his forefinger and thumb.

"Am I?— Major Percival, I want to say something to you, and I don't know how to say it; but I must speak," I said in a hurried husky voice. "I wish—to put an end to our engagement."

A long and appalling silence. I glanced at him timidly; his face was as black as thunder.

"Are you mad?" he asked at last, with indignant incredulity.

"No, not mad," I faltered, turning away my face, and holding my hand over my eyes to keep back the starting tears; "only very, very miserable. We are not suited to each other," I went on with a courage that surprised myself. "I do not love you as I should; I made a great mistake, and I am very, very sorry. Forgive me," I added in a broken voice, tendering my engagement ring with trembling fingers, "and release me!"

Another terrible silence ensued. I absolutely dared not look at Major Percival. At length he said in his usual voice:

"Now, who has been putting these ridiculous ideas into your head?—that interfering impertinent little woman, Mrs. Vane, or your cousin, the good-looking aide-de-camp, eh?"

I made no reply.

"Your aunt and uncle are not aware that you wish to jilt me? You have not their sanction?"

I shook my head; my tongue refused its office.

"Now listen to me, Nora, while I put the matter clearly before you."

I cannot recollect all he said; but this I know, that, within five minutes' time, my "ridiculous reasons" were scattered to the four winds; he was an accomplished rhetorician, and disposed of them with ludicrous facility.

I had never professed to love him; with a warm liking he was satisfied. We were just as suitable to each other as we had been eight months previously. The news of our engagement had gone far and wide. His friends were delighted to think he was going to marry at last. My diamonds and carriages were in preparation, my relations had given their hearty sanction; we had gone too far to go back.

Once Mrs. Percival—the possessor of his entire devotion, of every indulgence and luxury money and taste could procure, the envied of all—I would be indeed hard to please if I were not the happiest girl in the world. Thus Major Percival. Taking my hand in his, “Why, what’s this?” he cried, discovering the ring enfolded in my palm; “come, come, put it on again, and don’t let us have any more nonsense, eh, Nora?” slipping it once more on my nerveless finger.

“I cannot think why you wish to marry me?” I asked in a tearful tone, rolling a pebble to and fro with my shoe. “What can be your inducement?”

“That is easily answered,” he replied, possessing himself of both my hands. “You are young, you are charming, you are good-tempered”—*was I?*—“you are without comparison the prettiest girl in India, the ‘destroying angel,’ as you are called, and I have made up my mind that you shall be my wife.” There was no more to be said; Major Percival, and the force of circumstances combined, were far too strong for me. “I see what it is,” he proceeded, dropping my hands, gravely polishing his eye-glass, and surveying me dispassionately by its assistance; “you are not yourself. You are—ah—nervous. You want tone. The sudden heat of the weather is telling on you. You must drink claret, and I will speak to your aunt about a good sound tonic. Yes, a tonic is what you require; that will make you all right, and we will hear no more of these nervous fancies. I suppose I had better not mention your foolish proposal indoors?” he added, nodding impressively towards the house.

“On no account,” I made answer with nervous haste and a sinking heart.

“Then, really, I think, Nora, you ought to give me a kiss for my silence,” approaching an arm to my shrinking waist. “Oh, *hang* him!” to a mallee, who, most propitiously for me, at that moment made a third in the plant-house, watering-pot in hand. “However, you will give it to me another time. There is the bell,” he continued, putting his hand affectionately inside my arm, and leaning on me with unwonted familiarity. “Come, my destroying angel; my Neilgherry lily; my fanciful Nora! Come to breakfast!” and as we left the fernery, arm-in-arm, it

seemed to me that, far from regaining my freedom, I had gone out of the frying-pan into the fire !

My efforts to free myself were unavailing, no better than those of a fluttering bird in the strong firm grasp of a man. Things had gone too far. As Major Percival had said, circumstances were too strong for me, I could not run away for a second time in my life. The idea was preposterous. My trousseau and wedding-cake were already ordered, we had received presents and congratulations from numerous mutual friends, the bridesmaids were bespoke, our engagement and imminent wedding a solidly established fact. I could not break it off and give myself up to universal opprobrium, especially when my fatal notoriety was taken into consideration. No ! it was not to be thought of, and yet I halted between two opinions. I dared not put an end to my engagement, and yet I dreaded unspeakably the other alternative. What *was* I to do ? Sometimes swayed one way and sometimes another, my brain was in a perfect fever. Little did my friends and relatives guess at the terrible conflict that was going on in my mind. The mind, we all know, has a very considerable effect on the body, and my wakeful nights soon told a tale in pale, hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. Major Percival noted the change in my looks with considerable irritation, and was grievously anxious about my sharpened features and lost roses, and thanks to his suggestion, an unutterably nauseous tonic was duly administered to me by auntie's own hands no less than twice a day. Nellie Fox, too, remarked my altered appearance with affectionate anxiety.

"What is the matter with you, Nora ? Why are you so thin and so pale, and so miserably out of spirits ?" she asked, surveying me thoughtfully.

"I am perfectly well, I assure you, Nellie ; the last few days have been a little warm, that's all. I never was a blooming beauty, you know," I replied with assumed cheerfulness.

"You are not the same girl that you were six months ago," she returned with an air of resolute conviction. Then suddenly taking my hand in hers she added in a lower voice : "I believe this marriage is preying on your mind—I am sure it is ; I don't believe you care two straws for Major Percival, and if you don't love him don't marry

him. Even at the foot of the altar it would be better to change your mind than give your hand without your heart. You will think me a sentimental noodle, but just listen to me, Nora. You know what my home is, not a very happy one, not like yours ; I am palpably *de trop*, and my mother is most desirous to see me settled, as she calls it ; well, I had an excellent offer, as you may have heard, a very desirable *parti* in many ways, but as I did not care about the man I would not marry him ; I had actually the hardihood to return home single, to brave all my relations, and to eat quantities of humble pie. Yet I have never repented it—never ; I still possess my own self-respect and my independence. I am still Nellie Fox, spinster, aged twenty-four, and bidding fair to be an old maid. Nevertheless, I would rather go out washing or charring than marry a man I did not love, and I would have thought that you would have shared my sentiments. Confide in me, Nora ; tell me what is the trouble you have on your mind. Two heads are better than one.”

“Nothing ; nothing,” I answered, with an hysterical laugh ; “you are full of ridiculous fancies.” Then, suddenly leaning my head on her shoulder, my long pent-up feelings found vent in hot tears. Slipping down on the floor, I buried my face in her lap, and wept as if my heart would break. After a while I made an heroic effort and composed myself, drying my eyes and endeavouring to stifle my long-drawn sobs. “You are my friend, Nellie,” I said, taking her hands in mine ; “never, never speak of this folly of mine—never, as you love me ; it means nothing. I dare say everyone feels a little low and depressed when they are going to be married,” I concluded, with a watery smile, as I hurried away to bathe my tell-tale cheeks.

## CHAPTER XL.

### I AM RELEASED AT LAST.

Men were deceivers ever ;  
One foot on sea and one on shore ;  
To one thing constant never.

ALTHOUGH I would not give her my confidence I found great comfort in the society of Nellie Fox at this period. She showed me how to employ my time and occupy my thoughts. Only for her I really think I should have gone out of my senses. I had long established a corps of pensioners, beggars, the blind, the maimed, and the halt, who came to me for their dole every Saturday. I began with a lame old woman and two blind men ; they were the thin edge of the wedge, and now my force had increased to twenty, with power to add to their number. Uncle fumed and grumbled and scolded, and said that "it was a disgrace that the compound of the chief magistrate should be the haunt of all the vagrants in the place ;" but I soon talked him over, and, what is more, levied a heavy tribute. I had a system of fines, which were most remunerative. Smoking in the drawing-room, splashing gravy on the cloth, and other little items, came to a good deal, and uncle in the end was glad to compound for a fixed sum weekly. Auntie gave liberally, and Maurice munificently, and, what is more, he occasionally attended my "parades," as he called them, and tendered his assistance as interpreter.

In India there are no poor-houses, no poor-rates, and the indigent and helpless are a heavy burden on their kindred, who, I must confess, put Europeans to shame in



the care and devotion they show to their poor relations ; cheerfully supporting their aged and decrepit connections to the third and fourth generation. Even their mothers-in-law are esteemed and cared for ; but it is a hard, hard task to keep that famished wolf, want, from the door, although they contrive to exist on what would be absolute starvation to a European. A handful of rice or common grain suffices for their wants ; one rupee, so little to you or me, can afford them luxuries for a week. I collected a good many rupees, old clothes, and many crumbs from our well-laden table, and distributed my gleanings every Saturday morning. This in my days of thoughtless prosperity, but now with Nellie's assistance I went farther afield. I went out to the highways and hedges, and in seeing want and misery in its most heavy aspect, I thought less of my own affairs ; I was, I could see, very, very far from being the most miserable person that ever was born.

Major Percival had no sympathies with my "extraordinary hankering after beggars," as he termed it ; making coarse clothes, visiting and helping poor Eurasians and still poorer natives did not appeal to his sense of fitness. No ; he admired his Nora—on horseback, or, still better, in a ball-room. Society, brilliant society, was her proper sphere. And here I may mention that admiration was Major Percival's substitute for love. As long as I was pointed out as "the pretty Miss Neville," he was satisfied to be pointed out as her future husband. Were I to lose my good looks, I would lose *him* ; but I had not, not to any serious extent, and he had fully made up his mind to marry the belle of Mulkapore, and was the more bent on it in that he felt that I was by no means eager to be Mrs. Percival. This fact, I believe, piqued him not a little, and he was determined to lead me to the altar in a pure spirit of contradiction. Also he had a latent feeling that if he were to relinquish me, some other gallant suitor would gladly step into his vacant place. I cannot tell how all this was borne in upon me, but it was made quite clear from time to time by little stray words, and looks, and deeds.

I do not know whether his conscience smote him, or if the buzz of public opinion came to his ears ; but for some days after the races, Major Percival was unremitting in his attentions—driving with me, walking with me, and parading

me about on all possible occasions. I restored him his diamond solitaire, to his unfeigned joy, and he in return presented me with an offering in the shape of a very fine opal ring, which I reluctantly accepted, telling him it was sure to bring one of us ill-luck. However, he would take no denial, and pressed it on my second finger, where it was an extremely prominent object. The trousseau had arrived, and formed a topic of immense interest among our friends. Even Major Percival was most animated on the subject. My wedding-dress was superb, and elicited little screams of admiration as it emerged from its numerous wrappings of silver paper. Auntie and Major Percival expressed rapturous approval; but as for me, I could not refrain from a shudder when I beheld it, and firmly and resolutely refused to "try it on."

All auntie's fears were now completely allayed, uncle's growls and sneers were silenced, and for a few days everything went on velvet; I was numb and stupefied past all power of acute feeling, and stolidly resigned to my fate—the dead calm before the storm. One ever memorable afternoon a letter was brought to me. I was alone when I opened the square gray envelope. It was a note from Major Percival. He was a great scribe, wrote a capital hand, and used his powers freely.

"MY DEAREST FRIEND,"—(how extremely funny! he generally addressed me as his "Dearest Nora")—"I am glad to find that my little offering is acceptable. I would have left it in person, only I am engaged to drive with Nora this evening. Now that the fatal day approaches I must study appearances, and try to realise that I shall soon be a married man. Mrs. Neville is becoming as sharp as a lynx, and is ten times more *exigeante* than her niece. Poor little girl! She is so devoted to me, I often reproach myself for not being able to reciprocate her feelings. You know very well that in her case I mistook admiration for adoration; and you know beyond all doubt, my sweet Ethel, to whom I offer *both*. Yours always,—H. PERCIVAL.

"P.S.—I shall call in when my duties are over."

I became red and white by turns. I trembled from head to foot as I perused this precious missive. Amaze-

ment and wounded pride were *not* the uppermost feelings in my mind. That sheet of paper that I held in my hand was my reprieve and my release. Now I could put an end to our engagement; now I was once more *free*. This was my all-absorbing thought, and no captive released from prison ever hailed his liberty with greater joy. It took me some time to realise the truth, but, having fully grasped the subject, and being always, as you know, a young woman of impulse, I marched straight into the study, letter and envelope in hand. Auntie was racking her brains for the Europe mail, uncle was sorting wads, as I laid the note on the table, and asked abruptly: "Tell me, auntie and uncle, what you think of *this*! it has come to me in mistake for Mrs. St. Ubes." Uncle glanced hastily over it, and instantly became purple with passion; he dropped it as if it scorched him.

"Snob, hound, scoundrel! you *have* had a lucky escape, if ever a girl had. Thank the Lord, you are rid of the dishonourable Hastings Percival; I never liked him, and I am not a bit surprised at *this*," tossing the letter to his wife, who had been listening to her husband with rapid fluctuations of expression. "You always believed in him, missus; so much for your fine future viscount.

"I'll settle with him," concluded uncle, with a grim significant nod to his wife. "I'll talk to him!"

Auntie's long-lost roses returned, and mounted rapidly to her forehead, as she read the proffered letter.

"To think of such a thing!" she exclaimed with horror. "My poor child! I don't know *what* I am to say to you. I never, never dreamt that he——"

"I don't think your poor child requires any extraordinary sympathy. It seems to me that she is bearing up well," returned uncle, eyeing me critically. "Thank Heaven for all its mercies this night on your bended knees, and for your deliverance from Major Percival!"

"It's terrible—a terrible business!" ejaculated auntie. "The trousseau and dress are in the house, and the invitation cards already printed, and the cake will be here next week!" she concluded piteously.

"Never mind, old lady, we will celebrate our silver wedding; you shall wear the wedding gown, and I'll eat the cake!"

"And all the presents, and the bridesmaids' lockets, and everyone knowing all about it; it's *too* shocking!" moaned auntie.

"Come, come, my dear, you know very well that you don't want your niece to marry this unprincipled, elderly snob, do you?"

"No, *indeed*, I do not," replied auntie faintly.

"Then what are you talking about?" he asked imperiously.

But auntie's soul was shaken to its very centre, and she did not at once recover her mental equilibrium. She still sat bewailing the catastrophe, and viewing the subject from every aspect—from hers, from mine, from Mrs. Fox's—whilst uncle paced the room in a state of the highest excitement. Although by no means ill-pleased at the shape affairs had taken, and cordially delighted to think that I was once more free, yet this was a consideration totally apart from his feelings towards the culprit. He felt that *now* he might give reins to his long-repressed dislike to Major Percival, and he was getting more and more tremendous in his objurgations, and lashing himself into a towering passion, when at this most critical moment the subject of his invectives drove up to the door.

"Oh, here he is! Give me that letter, Nora! I'll give him a piece of my mind and no mistake. I'll astonish him. I'll teach him——"

"For mercy's sake, don't let him go," cried auntie distractedly; "there will be a fearful scene, and he'll only make matters worse; I'll go myself"—tugging at her cap—"or, you go, Nora; you are the most composed. I don't know *how* I could speak to him, I feel so angry and so agitated."

"I'll settle the business, Margaret," interposed uncle, standing before her, with his grizzly locks bristling with indignation, and much resembling an infuriated cockatoo. "It is my affair."

"No, no, Jim, my dear; wait till you are cool. You look much more like a subject for personal restraint than for undertaking any other interview. Go, Nora!"—eagerly—"go!"

I hastened from the room, fearing that uncle, who was a very passionate old person, would take the law into his

own hands and do some deed of violence. I paused before entering the drawing-room, to collect my thoughts and pull myself together. My heart was beating very fast as I walked into the room and discovered Major Percival standing before the mirror, endeavouring to catch a glimpse of himself *en profil*. Not a whit abashed by my entrance, he exclaimed :

"What, not ready ? *Really*, Nora, I think you might have managed to be dressed. I sent you a note an hour ago. You got it, of course," he said in an injured tone.

"Yes."

"Well, why are you keeping me waiting ?" he urged fretfully.

"I got your note," I replied, looking at him steadily, "but it was not intended for *me*. You put it in the wrong envelope !"

"I don't know what you are driving at," he answered impatiently.

"You wrote to Mrs. St. Ubes this afternoon ?"

"Certainly I did ! and what if I did ?" defiantly.

"You put her note into my envelope, and I have read it," I returned, looking him full in the face. "*Now*, perhaps, you can understand why I am not prepared to go out driving with you this evening, why I shall never drive with you again, and why from this moment our engagement and all further intercourse are at an end."

As I made this statement he turned all colours. From crimson to purple, purple to pink, pink to white. As I concluded, he plucked up courage, and said, with a forced laugh :

"You do not mean to let such a small affair as that little mistake break off our engagement ?"

"I do ; it is at an end. Devoted as I am to you," I returned with marked emphasis, "still, as you have mistaken admiration for adoration, I will no longer hold you to your duty, nor withhold you from a shrine where you have already burnt so much incense."

The quotation from his note was a shot betwixt wind and water—a shot that told ; but still he rallied valiantly and said :

"It was a foolish mistake ; but it really means nothing—nothing, I assure you. Some women expect to be

written to in that style; but I am perfectly indifferent to Mrs. St. Ubes. That letter was a mere *façon de parler*. I wish you saw some she got from other men. She showed me several. My little effusion was harmless in comparison; and it really meant nothing—absolutely nothing.”

“Whether it was a *façon de parler* or not I am too unsophisticated to judge; but I rather think that men usually write in a different strain to married ladies. At any rate, I am fully determined never to marry the man who wrote this letter,” holding it up. “I give you liberty and your *congé* at the same time; your letters and presents will be returned to you this evening, and now, Major Percival—good-bye.”

“Not so fast, my dear girl, not so fast; you are acting on the impulse of the moment, and I tell you quite impartially, you are acting foolishly. I cannot allow you to be carried away by your passion, to do a deed you will ever *regret*. Try and compose yourself, Nora, and listen to me. Have you considered that your wedding-dress is actually in the house? Have you thought of the frightful public *esclandre* this will entail?” surveying me with angry scrutiny.

“I have.”

“Have you reflected seriously on the brilliant position you are about to spurn?”

“I have.”

“Have you taken into consideration my love and devotion?”

“It requires a vigorous imagination to grasp them; but I have——”

“Think for a moment calmly of what you are about to do; look well before you leap. I will make you an excellent husband; I can give you wealth and rank; do not let us part at the eleventh hour. We will be the talk of the whole presidency,” he added, and I could see that his temper was rising fast. “Does your aunt know that you contemplate taking advantage of this miserable pretext to break off your engagement?”

“She does. There is no need to argue the matter. There is no more to be said,” I replied, turning to leave the room.

“Stay a moment,” he cried, nearly livid with passion. I paused and confronted him once more.

"This is the last time I shall ever speak to you, Major Percival. So be as good as to say whatever you have to say at once!"

"I shall," he almost shouted. "I have no doubt that if I were fortunate enough to combine my standing and position with your *Irish cousin's* age and looks, you would rescind this rude dismissal, and make all proper allowances for my unfortunate blunder. I believe you were head over ears in love with the fellow," he continued hoarsely. "But do not imagine that he will come back to your lure. No, no! Miss Neville. The burnt child dreads the fire; and by all accounts he was badly scorched. If you have a distant hope of marrying him some day, relinquish it at once. You had better let our engagement go on, you had indeed. I am telling you this in your own interests. You really had!"

"That will do," I interrupted. "You have insulted me sufficiently! Was not your base disgraceful behaviour enough without this! Even had you not written that letter to Mrs. St. Ubes, what you have just now dared to say is amply sufficient to put an end to everything between us." Without waiting for any reply, I turned my back on Major Percival, and walked out of the room.

Now that I was lost to him, my value appeared greater than ever in Major Percival's eyes. Such is the perversity of human nature. He wrote me sheets and sheets of the humblest and most abject apologies, and put them in their proper envelopes. He had several interviews in one day with auntie, protesting, urging, and entreating, and one bad quarter of an hour with uncle. It was quite useless. I declined to see, write, or speak to him again, and returned his numerous letters, and his presents, which were few but extremely costly. I sent him a parting message, and remained altogether at home till I heard that he had left Mulkapore, and shaken the dust of our station off his aristocratic feet. Of course such an event as the rupture of our engagement speedily became known, strive to hush it up as we would. It was hinted at the band, whispered at the Club, and was soon public property. In spite of Mrs. St. Ubes's artful endeavours to give the story a complexion of her own, the real truth was pretty well guessed

---

at, especially as Mrs. St. Ubes had the execrable taste to appear in the various articles of jewellery which I had discarded and returned. To this very day, I believe that my late marquise engagement ring adorns one of her pretty taper fingers!



## CHAPTER XLI.

### I ENCOUNTER THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER, AND ENDEAVOUR TO SLAY HIM.

Trifles light as air  
Are, to the jealous, confirmation strong  
As proofs of Holy Writ.—*Othello*.

I WONDERED if Dicky Campbell's heart had been taken at the rebound when I saw him constantly in Nellie Fox's company. Gradually she had softened down my ill-doings till we became good friends once more. I was sincerely glad to see one of my former admirers completely and satisfactorily *cured*. He was quite brotherly to me now; all his eyes and ears were for Nellie. He rode with her, played tennis with her, absorbed her attention, if possible, and waylaid her on all occasions. To my very great surprise, she received his advances most complacently. Generally—nay, always—once a man showed any symptoms of a desire to overstep the bounds of friendship, and wander into the flowery paths of love, she pulled him up sharp and snubbed him rudely.

"I'll *never* marry," she had often said; "I cannot endure people to think that we girls have come out here to, as it were, offer ourselves in a better market than we find at home; I let them see at *once* that there is a reserve price on *me*, and that I am not for sale." Such was her pride, and such the sharpness of her sarcastic tongue, that her would-be admirers fled from her in dismay.

I often remonstrated with her for her curt abrupt manners, but my expostulations were in vain.

"It's not a bit of use, Nora, I can't help it. I must say

smart things when they are quivering on the tip of my tongue; and men are so petted and spoiled in our house that I cannot resist setting them down, and putting them in their places."

She was more lenient to Benedicts, and the mere fact of a man being an impossible *parti*, and a pauper to boot, was sufficient to insure him a certain passport to her good graces. "At any rate *he* cannot think that I am scheming to marry him," she would remark triumphantly, when rebuked for her imprudent preference by the all-pervading eye of *la mère Fox*.

I was very much amazed to see that Nellie tolerated Dicky Campbell, and hinted as much.

"My godmother has left me a legacy of two hundred pounds a year, and now, to a certain extent, I can please myself."

"By pleasing yourself am I to understand that you are going to become Mrs. Campbell?"

"I hope so," she answered, with a blush.

Need I remark that I took the greatest interest in the couple? My own love affairs had been most disastrous. I had done with everything of that kind, I told myself, and I turned all my interests and energies in the direction of Nellie's engagement, and took the whole business under my special protection. I talked uncle over, and he talked Colonel Fox into a reasonable frame of mind. My wedding-gown, wreath, veil, and cake were placed at Nellie's disposal. The thing went on wheels. The day was named, presents showered in on the happy couple; a house was taken and furnished, and a carriage seriously discussed.

"Who do you think has sent me a present?" said Nellie, bursting into my room two days before the wedding. "I will give you fifty guesses. Come now," standing before me with her hands behind her back.

"The khan of Tartary; the queen of the Cannibal Islands; your *Dhoby*!" I returned, without raising my eyes from a triumph of millinery that I was finishing off to swell the trousseau.

"Don't be a goose all your life, and look here!"

Thus adjured, I raised my eyes to a very superior blue velvet jeweller's case. It contained a handsome massive

gold necklet—one of the most valuable gifts Nellie had yet received—and a lovely locket set with pearls.

“Wasn’t it awfully, awfully good of him?” she exclaimed. “Just the very thing I wanted most!”

“Good of whom? Of course I make an allowance for a certain amount of softening of the brain incidental to this great occasion; but if I knew the donor’s name it would be easier to answer your question!”

For all reply she tossed a card into my lap, on which was written in a firm well-known handwriting:

“With Captain Beresford’s best wishes.”

“Yes! it was very nice and thoughtful of him. You will have to give him a little *cadeau* when *he* marries,” I replied with a weak effort at gaiety.

“Maurice Beresford’s wife will be the person I shall give my offering to, if he marries to please me,” rejoined Nellie calmly, shutting up the case.

“Too much spooning has turned your brain, my good girl. You must be quite foolish to fancy that Captain Beresford, as well as Dicky Campbell, will marry to please you! You don’t even know Miss Ross!”

“He will marry to please me all the same, you see if he doesn’t,” said Nellie, waltzing round the room with her new present in her hand.

“A strait waistcoat would become you better than a wedding-dress,” I exclaim, looking at her blankly. “If you would bring me the body of your cream-coloured silk, in a lucid interval, I should be obliged to you, Miss Fox.”

“I don’t believe Miss Ross is engaged to Captain Beresford; I don’t believe it one bit. How cross you look! I’ll give you something to look cross for,” bending over me from behind and ruffling up my naturally curly locks. “Shall I tell you whom Maurice Beresford will marry?” stooping down and speaking in a whisper; “why you, to be sure—pretty Miss Neville.”

“Nellie!” I cried indignantly. But Nellie was gone.

“The wedding went off with great *éclat*”—*vide* the *Mulka-pore Herald*. The bride looked lovely. My satin dress and long lace veil suited her splendidly. We had reversed positions. She was the bride, in my magnificent French gown; I was the bridesmaid, in the pale blue foulard originally intended for her. How glad I was to see

Mrs. Campbell walking down the aisle instead of Mrs. Percival; how happy I felt. My old spirits were coming back, and I entered into all the wedding festivities *con amore*.

Soon after the wedding we went to the hills with Colonel and Mrs. Vane, and shared a house with them at Ootacamund. I wish I could give some vague notion of our charming abode. It was situated on the side of a hill, and we looked out from our jessamine sheltered veranda over a deep green valley on the opposite mountains, well named *blue*, and on the pale, far away peaks of the distant "Kundahs." Our garden in front was rich with roses, carnations, and large shrubs of sweet-scented verberna; orange-trees, heavily laden with sweet little golden oranges, lined our avenue, and the whole of our premises was surrounded by a hedge, partly of heliotrope and partly of passion-flowers, crimson, purple, and white. An enormous jessamine hung over the front veranda; the whole house was pervaded with its perfume, and its white flowers lay extensively scattered over the steps, between whose crevices, here and there, a spray of mignonette had sprouted as a weed. To people from the dried, yellow, burnt-up plains, from a partial baking, thanks to the premature hot weather, what a paradise, what enjoyment, to sit in that cool jessamine scented veranda, inhaling the fragrant thin air, and looking out on the wild profusion of flowers, and far away beyond them, across the green valley, to the bold, purple mountains, and distant blue hills.

The same familiar faces of last year met us at the Library, the A.B.C. Grounds, and in the Government Gardens. Of course there were numerous strangers besides. Among others, General, Mrs., and Miss Ross. It was a great relief to my mind to hear that the "A.D.C." Captain Beresford had taken two months' leave, and joined a party who had gone out tiger-shooting. I am not ashamed to say that I took the deepest interest in Miss Ross. She was tall and well-proportioned, and was what is called a "fine-looking girl." She had jet-black hair, very dark expressive eyes, and an aquiline nose. Some people praised her enthusiastically; others did not. She was decidedly a candle-light beauty, and looked best at night. For my own part, I honestly admired her. But, all the same, she was not a

bit like what I had pictured her to myself as Maurice's choice. And she was certainly my antipodes in every way.

Ooty was very gay, and we went out a great deal. Uncle had brought up the saddle-horses this year, and I enjoyed various gallops with the Ooty hounds. I was all the better for the change to the hills; my lost roses had returned at last, so had my former high spirits. But I had profited by sad experience; I had curbed my propensity for flirting—if I ever *really* had an inclination that way. No more discreet young lady than myself inhaled the thin health-restoring breezes of the far-famed Blue Mountains. About a month before uncle's leave was up we had a visit from Rody, now an officer in Her Majesty's 2nd Battalion of Martini Rifles, and quartered in the Bombay Presidency. He was very little altered—almost as much of a boy, and quite as full of animal spirits as ever. How delighted I was when I saw his familiar *grin* in the front seat of the mail tonga. I forgot all my lately-acquired manners, and running up, wildly brandishing my umbrella, cried, "Stop, Rody! stop—here I am!" greatly to the amusement of the two passengers who occupied the back seat, and witnessed our greetings with sympathetic smiles.

Mrs. Vane and I had walked down to Charing Cross, to meet and welcome the coming guest. Leaving his port-manteau to its fate, Rody sprang out, and seizing me by both hands, wrung them till I nearly cried—wrung them again and again.

"It is easy to see that you are both Irish," remarked Mrs. Vane tolerantly; "in any other country such a greeting would be considered a violent assault, with intent to do serious bodily harm!"

How we talked, and exchanged volleys of questions; how we looked at each other, and burst out laughing. Of course, Rody stayed with us; we packed him away in a little bedroom the size of a pantry, and gave him a warm welcome. It was delightful to see a familiar Galloway face sitting opposite to me at meal-times. I could not help staring at my schoolfellow, nor refuse myself the luxury of looking at him for sometimes ten minutes at a time.

Rody was now about two-and-twenty. He still retained his very light hair and light eyelashes, and he was still,

and always would be, plain ; plain, but with such an open, honest face, brimming over with intelligence and bright with good-humour, that it was far, far superior to many a handsome one in my opinion.

"You are not a bit altered, Rody," I exclaimed, after I had gazed at him critically, "only you're much taller and more manly ; I would have known you anywhere."

"I can't say I return the compliment," he replied coolly. "I would never have recognised you ; only when I saw a girl brandishing her arms about, and shouting like an escaped lunatic, I knew it could be no one else."

A company of very distinguished amateurs got up some first-rate theatricals, to which we went, of course. There was a fearful crush for seats, and numbers had to be sent away from the door. We were fortunate enough to secure places, but not all together. Mrs. Vane and I were cut off from the others, and thought ourselves lucky to get seats in the sixth row from the front. These front seats were reserved. Why were we so stupid as not to have gone and taken our tickets the day before at Misquith's ? Some of these places were still vacant when the curtain rose, and the first act was nearly over when in walked General Ross, Mrs. Ross, Miss Ross, and *Maurice* !

Perhaps he seemed a little graver and older, but certainly on the whole he looked remarkably well, as he steered himself clear of Miss Ross's pretty pink train, and subsided into a seat beside her. The play, clever and amusing though it was, and acted to admiration, had now but a secondary share of *my* attention. My eyes and thoughts wandered away in spite of me to Maurice and his betrothed. They seemed very happy, and far more lover-like than Major Percival and I had ever been. Now he whispered to her, and looked over her programme with both their heads together in the pleasantest intimacy, or bent forward to answer her eager and animated remarks with nods and smiles.

Again she arrested his attention, tapping him on the arm with her fan. In answer to this signal he turned half round and looked at the audience behind him. He could not see *me*, that was one comfort ; I sat too directly in a line with the back of his head. Whoever he was looking

for he was disappointed, for, after a searching scrutiny, he turned to his companion and sorrowfully shook his head. Could he have been looking for *me*? Did he wish to know that I was a spectator of his happiness? Probably he would like me to see how easily he had been consoled. Well, I would not wear the willow, whatever I did. It was a decoration that I shrank from most sensitively.

The theatricals were to be succeeded by a dance, and when, during the interval, a programme was brought to me by little Captain Vance of the 25th Dragoons, I allowed him to put his name down for no less than four waltzes. Hitherto I had snubbed and repressed poor little Captain Vance, but now he should have a small mite of encouragement just for a change. He was in the seventh heaven of felicity, and I added to his happiness by allowing him to insinuate himself into a vacant seat next me during the interval, and to hold my bouquet and to fan me! This was all very wrong I know; I knew it at the time too—I knew it and gloried in it I am afraid. Maurice took advantage of the self-same interval to stand up and once more scrutinise the house. He saw me *this* time! Saw me with my little cavalier bending towards me and fanning me with an air of reverential tenderness. The sight was evidently too much for his composure, for he turned his head pointedly in the opposite direction. Leaning against the pillar beside him, with his arms akimbo, he gave the whole of his attention to the drop-scene.

After the theatricals came the dance, and I danced every one that was down on the programme, and pretended to enjoy myself excessively. Much to my surprise, Maurice did not dance at all. He lounged in doorways with other men, and criticised the performers. I observed him go up and speak to our party, but he did not encounter me till the evening was nearly over. Just as I had concluded my fourth waltz, and third consecutive dance with Captain Vance, I came face to face with him in the doorway as I was passing through, and I adventured a greeting. "How do you do, Maurice?" half holding out my hand. A very cool bow was his only reply, as he stood aside in a most marked manner to permit me to pass. It was quite evident that he would not speak to me, and the casual glance he bestowed on me was composed solely of two ingredients—

indifference and contempt. I saw him cloak and shawl Miss Ross at the end of the evening with affectionate solicitude, and see her into the family coach. As he returned up the steps, I was coming down, still with Captain Vance, and he nearly ran against me, excusing himself with a formal apology.

"You know Beresford, don't you?" said my escort cheerfully.

"Oh, yes; he is my cousin."

"Indeed," with a certain surprise; "they say he is engaged to Miss Ross—nice-looking girl, is she not?"

"Oh, very!" I answered shortly. "Here is our carriage at last;" and bidding my companion good-night with a haste and alacrity that was by no means complimentary, I buried myself at once in a corner of our hired brougham, and feigned sleep.

I was not at all pleased with myself, as I stood before my glass, taking off my finery, and untwisting my long hair.

"You *are* a flirt!" I exclaimed to my reflection; "you went on abominably to-night, and, what is worse, you are a dog in the manger into the bargain. You wouldn't and couldn't marry Maurice yourself, and now that he is engaged to another girl, you are as jealous as ever you can be."

Yes; I was jealous—frightfully jealous, I said to myself, as two big tears came into my eyes, and rolled down my cheeks. Unable to endure the sight of my own emotion, I retired from the dressing-table, speedily undressed, and bundled myself into bed, where, in spite of valorous resolutions to forget Maurice, if possible, *altogether*, and, at the same time, to be kind and friendly to my cousin elect, Miss Ross, I cried myself to sleep.

A bright gay morning that morning of our picnic to Grey's Falls, a favourite place for these most popular hill entertainments. Not less than forty people set forth, on horse and pony back, in carriages, tongas, and bullock-bandies, all bent on enjoying themselves, and spending a thoroughly pleasant and long-to-be-remembered day. Oh, miserably deluded individuals! Colonel and Mrs. Vane courageously adventured themselves in a hired



conveyance—to wit, a vehicle that had started in its youth as a waggonette, and now in its old age, and doubtless thanks to several bad smashes, had been distorted into an open carriage. A pair of most dishevelled, vicious-looking ponies consummated the turn-out, and, queer as it looked, it was nothing to several others that also took the road. Uncle and I rode; so did Rody, on a small, fat, Pegu pony, that barely lifted his legs from the ground. Our party was strong in cavalry, and a very merry squadron we were, chattering and laughing in the highest of spirits, as we wound in and out down the ghaut road. High above all our voices, Rody's brogue could easily be distinguished. It gave a rich Irish aroma to the buzz of conversation. He knew many of the company, and kept trotting about on his dog-like steed from party to party, bandying jokes with the men and blarney with the women.

We arrived at our destination about two o'clock, a deep, rocky, shady hollow on the side of a hill. A loud, brawling torrent rushed through the little valley, and gave way to its feelings by dashing itself over a fall of eighty feet; then, picking itself up, it once more pursued its mad career down to the plains below. A very sensible situation had been selected for our meal; the cloth, I observed, was already laid. I dismounted and greeted our hostess, an active-minded lady, supplemented by two pretty daughters, who were helping her to do the honours and receive her guests. A ten-mile ride had sharpened our appetites, and after a little desultory conversation we were not sorry to be summoned to luncheon, and lost no time in gathering round the viands, in various Turkish attitudes, on cushions, rugs, and shawls.

"I am ravenous," exclaimed Rody, casting an appreciative eye on the good things before him. "Come and let us sit where there's nothing to carve," he added, artfully avoiding the neighbourhood of a large "Europe" ham. "Here, this will do splendidly," he said, flinging himself prostrate before a dish of stewed peaches. "Now, what will you have? Look round, and don't make up your mind rashly. My boy is here"—oh, greedy, provident Rody—"and he will take care of us. Find out if there's

any soup," he said, turning to his domestic with an impressive whisper.

His surmise was correct. There *was* soup, excellent mulligatawny. As we were discussing it, the clatter of horses' hoofs on the rocky path behind us notified that "the cry was still they come."

"So here you are at last! I had almost given you up," cried our hostess joyfully, half rising from her throne of carriage-cushions, and evidently addressing the new arrivals.

"So sorry we are late; we took the wrong turn, and missed our way," said the genial voice of General Ross, stretching a long arm over the heads of several people, and shaking Mrs. Morton's hand with much warmth. Miss Ross, in a gray tweed habit and brown mushroom topee, was affectionately welcomed to a seat of honour. But who was the third member of the party, standing directly behind me? It was Maurice, of course.

"Here you are, Beresford," cried stupid, ignorant, blundering Rody, making a space between us on the rug; "don't make a stranger of yourself, there's lots of room."

A distinct family likeness exists between the backs of all gray Ellwood topees and dark blue habits; and Maurice, in most blissful unconsciousness of the situation awaiting him, and *who* it was that he was going to sit beside, immediately accepted the proffered place. As he doubled himself up, and found safe and comfortable accommodation for his long, spurred riding-boots, muttering an apology, his eye for the first time fell upon *me*, and the merry smile he had brought with him vanished from his countenance.

Doubtless he would have fled, but that his retreat was already cut off by a stout gentleman who had been rather crowded out by the recent arrivals, and who had taken up a situation immediately behind him. Besides, Rody's invitation had been so loud and so urgent, that, even had he seen the pitfall, he could hardly have escaped. Behold us, then, sharing the same rug (and that a small one), sitting elbow to elbow in the close intimacy that such a luxury compelled. The present most embarrassing situation completely threw into the shade everything of the kind I had ever pre-

viously experienced. No language could describe my sensations. My face burned, my lips trembled. Was I going to cry? Truly that would be the *finale* of all my follies. I felt that, at whatever cost, I must endeavour to assume a decent semblance of composure. Mastering my voice with a great effort, and glancing at my cousin, I said bravely enough :

“How do you do, Maurice?”

This time he did answer me. An unintelligible muttering, lost in his moustache, was the reply.

“Isn’t it jolly, the three of us sitting here together? It’s just like old times at Gallow,” remarked Rody expansively, hospitably doing the honours of the rug, and heaping our plates with lobster mayonnaise.

Maurice, who had always had a large share of self-command, seemed to have recovered his first surprise. (But *why* was he carving a fowl with a *fruit-knife*, while plenty of good and true steel was at his disposal?) He conversed with various acquaintances with the most complete *sang-froid*, and as far as I was concerned, treated me with frozen, studied indifference, and as if he had made my acquaintance for the first time within the last ten minutes.

Exhilarated by “dry Monopole,” Rody became every instant more friendly and personal in his remarks. His tongue ran on uninterruptedly, in blissful ignorance of the social volcano in his neighbourhood. His simple good faith tidied over the first dreadful moments of our most awkward situation. Leaning on his elbow during a pause between the courses, he glanced critically round at the other guests.

“That’s a very pretty little girl, that Miss Templeton, the one in the pink frock. But there are two or three people here who are scarcely human. For instance, the fellow opposite—the little wizened man in the holland suit. He is like a chimpanzee to look at; and as to his appetite, no locust could hold a candle to him!

“There goes the whole shape! There is no occasion to say ‘press the jelly,’ in his case,” cried Rody angrily.

“‘Press the jelly?’ What do you mean? You are pleased to speak in riddles and utter dark sayings this afternoon, my good young friend,” said Maurice seriously.

“Don’t you know the story of the clerical dinner at home, where Honor, after anxiously handing that dainty

round to all the guests, came and whispered to my father in a loud and audible aside: 'Press the jelly, it won't keep'?"

"It is evident that *you* were not at table," replied Maurice; "you would have relieved her mind from any uneasiness on that score."

"No, I was not; nor Nora either"—dragging me into the conversation by main force—"she had an appetite if you like. Hadn't you, Miggs? What a girl you were in those days, to be sure. No one would think it to look at you now. What pranks we played," he continued, evidently bent on an immediate review of our early career.

I did not care to have the daylight let in on my youthful misdemeanours; and, turning away my head, feigned temporary deafness. Raising his voice, Rody proceeded in a tone of complacent retrospection.

"Do you remember the evening we climbed on the roof of the back lodge, and let a packet of squibs down the chimney, and how anxiously we watched the result through the window? Lord, what an explosion there was! How it blew old Dan Connor and Sweetlips out into the middle of the floor; what devastation it created among the dancers, ha, ha, ha! and they all swore that it was either the devil or *us*."

"Rody, Rody, for goodness' sake be quiet," I implored, in an agonised undertone, seeing the amused and startled looks of our friends, who had been eagerly listening to Rody's reminiscences. But he was evidently in a teasing humour, and glancing with a significant look and a quarter of a wink at Maurice, on whom the ham he had so skilfully eluded had now devolved, remarked with an air of cordial confidence:

"Oh, I can tell worse stories about you than that, Miss Nora. Do you see the little foxy-faced woman opposite?"—indicating Mrs. Gower, who was positively gloating over us. "She rode a good bit of the way here with me, and made some nice disclosures about *you*, meaning to be very complimentary all the time."

"Oh, of course. But you should not listen to such confidences about your friends," I interrupted hastily.

"Why not, pray? I heard some capital things about you."

"You should never believe anything that you hear, and only the half of what you see," I remarked with great emphasis.

"Oh! Then I am not to believe that you are the belle of Mulkapore, nor that you have so many admirers you don't know what to do?"

"Certainly not!"

"Nor that you are a most accomplished flirt, and think nothing of being engaged to two or three infatuated individuals at one and the same time?"

"Rody!"

"Well, to judge by your face one would think it was a true bill. Just look at her, Beresford?"

If ever I was scarlet, I was scarlet now.

"You were on the spot," continued my tormentor, appealing to Maurice, who was sitting well back, and holding aloof from the discussion, with his plate on his knees, evidently making up for the time he had lost as carver to forty guests; "you saw for yourself; you can corroborate these tales, no doubt."

"I never believe anything I hear, only what I *see*," replied Maurice, raising his eyes to mine significantly.

"Oh! she has been talking you over into keeping her secrets; that's very plain. But I wish you would tell me who was the gunner fellow that loved her so dreadfully. The little foxy-faced lady told me——"

"Look out, my good fellow: there goes all your claret! I say, mind what you are doing!" as Maurice, with a dexterous movement, tilted the whole of his claret and water over Rody's neat breeches. This providential accident created a diversion, and for some moments he busied himself in mopping up the liquid with a napkin, and then he once more returned to the charge. He certainly seemed to be under some malignant influence to-day.

"How you two did *hate* each other long ago!" he continued, reflectively breaking up a crust of bread; "but of course you saw a great deal of each other at Mulkapore, and are capital friends now, eh?" leaning on his elbow, and nodding speculatively at Maurice and me. An unintelligible murmur from Maurice, and a ghastly smile on my part, satisfied him of our assent.

"By-the-way, French," said my cousin suddenly, "how do you get on with your stepmother?"

The subject thus abruptly started afforded a fine field for Rody's powers of observation, execration, and vituperation, and luckily turned the conversation, for in another moment I should have been in hysterics. According to Rody, Mrs. French was neither an agreeable addition to the family circle nor a social success. She had endeavoured to cast off Kilcool and soar among the county people, and had fallen in consequence between two stools. She and her old allies, the Curries, were now bitter enemies. Altogether she had made the parish too hot to hold her, and Mr. French had commuted and compounded, and retired to live in peace (?) in the outskirts of Dublin.

Whilst Rody was pouring out his grievances I had time to compose myself, and felt tolerably calm and cool by the time he had embarked in an animated discussion with his right-hand neighbour, a lively young lady with wicked black eyes and pretty dimples. Soon she absorbed his whole attention, and he actually turned his back on Maurice, and he and I were left to our fate. I caught uncle's eyes at this juncture looking sermons, Mrs. Vane's face beaming with intelligence, and Mrs. Gower's actually sparkling with cold-blooded mischief.

I felt that it behoved me to make some struggle to keep up appearances, and I boldly launched forth into conversation on the subject of the weather and the prospect of an early monsoon. But I had hardly touched on this topic ere a scene at the opposite corner engrossed our whole attention. A lady, who had been silently watching her own particular and cherished cavalier paying the most heartrending attention to a pretty new arrival, now no longer able to restrain her feelings, burst into tears; not soft becoming dewdrops, but loud, angry, passionate sobs (a slight hysterical attack her relations assured us afterwards), with a scathing and most criminating glance towards the ill-behaved couple; she was conveyed from the table, or, rather, the table-cloth, by her nearest lady friend, and consigned to the seclusion of a distant bullock-bandy, from which, nevertheless, her moans and exclamations could be distinctly heard. My feelings, already wound up to the highest tension, found

vent in an explosion of agonising smothered laughter, audible, of course, to Maurice, who regarded me with an air of cool, grave disapproval.

Our hostess—a woman with her wits about her—at this awkward crisis, now made a move as if to intimate that the unfortunate victim in the bullock-bandy had merely forestalled her wish, and soon every lady and gentleman was sauntering away—some went to the falls, some went up the sholah, some climbed the rocks—in two minutes the assembly had dispersed. I looked appealingly at Rody; the fickle, selfish wretch had no ears for anyone but his black-eyed beauty. As I stood twisting my riding-whip and hesitating *what* to do, Maurice observed :

“I suppose we may as well follow them,” indicating Rody and his companion. And follow them we did—down through the soft earthy soil of a coffee plantation, much to the detriment of my best habit; down, down to the very foot of the falls. Before leaving the scene of our late repast, I noticed the recreant adorer making profuse apologies at the door of the bullock-bandy consecrated to his lady-love. He finally took a seat inside the vehicle, in order to appease her outraged feelings: let us hope he succeeded.

Having scrambled down through the coffee in the wake of a dozen other couples, Maurice and I found ourselves on the brink of a wide, shallow basin, just below Grey’s Falls. The margin, shocking to relate, was strewn with socks and shoes, and the owners thereof were in the act of wading across the river, each carrying a lovely burden—the lady of his choice! For on the other side of the water *the* view of the day was to be obtained. Husbands carried wives and wives’ friends; but various young ladies, who were neither wives nor wives’ friends, were gallantly borne across by their respective admirers.

Rody’s companion, a very plump and comfortable little person, was in the act of embarking in his arms when we arrived.

“Come along, Beresford. There’s a splendid view from this other hill. Everyone is going across. Bring over Nora, she’s no weight,” he added encouragingly, giving his fair burden a final hoist and setting forth on his travels.

"Do you wish to cross? Shall I carry you over?" said Maurice, with anything but an air of warmth in his solicitation.

"Oh, no—no! Not on any account," I replied hurriedly, much to his undoubted relief. We both turned attention simultaneously to Rody, and watched his proceedings with the deepest interest. When nearly halfway across he and his young lady were seized with an uncontrollable fit of laughter. He laughed so immoderately that his progress was to be reckoned by inches, and when almost in mid-stream his sense of the ludicrous became so strong and overwhelming that he lost the use of his arms and legs altogether, and with a shout, a stagger, and a splash, he collapsed with his unfortunate partner into two feet of nice cool water.

"That fellow is as mad as a hatter!" exclaimed Maurice wrathfully, as he witnessed the scene with the deepest gravity. For my part, when I saw Rody and his victim struggling and splashing about like two water-dogs, I immediately subsided on the nearest stone, and giving myself up to the pleasures of the moment, wept and screamed with laughter.

"I am glad to see that your spirits are as high as ever," observed Maurice stiffly, eyeing me curiously.

"Who could help laughing at such a sight as that?" I cried, indicating the two dripping figures, who were now effecting a landing amidst the shrieks of a surrounding circle.

"Perhaps you would like me to beckon Rody back? Now that he is wet, a trip more or less is of no consequence. He seems in a gamesome humour, and no doubt is capable of repeating the same amusing catastrophe."

To this remark I vouchsafed no reply, but sat in majestic silence on a large piece of rock, beating my habit with my riding-whip, and wondering to myself what I had better do next.

Maurice meanwhile looked up and down, and across and around, evidently in search of another party to whom he could politely consign me; but, alas! there was not a single chaperon in sight—we were alone. Resigning himself to his fate, he turned towards me and said in his most company voice:



"You had better come out of the sun, and get under the shade of those trees."

To this move I acquiesced in silence, and followed my cousin towards a cool retreat under some shady rhododendrons by the river's edge, and some distance below the ford. Here I selected a large, flat, mossy stone, that made a kind of rude arm-chair, and Maurice, leaning against a neighbouring boulder, proceeded to light a cigarette. I glanced at him stealthily as he stood bare-headed, sheltering the wind from his fusee with his broad-leaved hat. It was nearly a year since I had seen him face to face, and although he was almost unchanged in appearance, save that he looked a shade older and graver, I felt in a vague indescribable way that here was a very different Maurice to the one I had known at Mulkapore.

Suddenly he looked up and met my inquisitive eyes point-blank. Returning my gaze with a cool steady stare, and tossing away the match, he said as he resumed his hat :

"So it's all broken off I hear! You gave him his *congé* like everyone else; it was only a matter of time."

"What are you talking about?" I asked evasively.

"Your late engagement to Major Percival, of course."

"Yes, it is quite at an end," I returned, stooping to pick up a pebble.

"Was he not rich enough, after all? Was there some flaw in his position?"

"It was nothing of *that* kind, I assure you. We—we did not suit."

"Not suit!" echoed my companion sarcastically. "At one time he was everything that was desirable. There is no occasion to conceal your little foibles from me. I know you, my irresistible cousin. Why not tell the truth at once—you jilted him."

"I did *not*," I exclaimed hastily.

"Then am I to understand that he jilted you?" with an incredulous sneer.

"There's no occasion for you to understand anything about it," I answered, my temper rising—submission has its limits.

"True. I stand admonished. May I venture to inquire if you are engaged to anyone at present?"

"No."

"What, neither publicly nor privately?" he said, emphasising the last word.

"One would think I was in the witness-box. You have quite a talent for cross-examination," I answered, ignoring his question. "Suppose we talk of something else. How is Tuppence? Did you bring him up?"

"Tuppence? Oh, he's all right; he is at the club, in the enjoyment of his usual good health, as much addicted to bone-planting as ever."

"And how is Desertborn, and the two polo ponies, Pinafore and Picnic?"

"They are all to the fore."

It was impossible to go on asking individually for all the stud, and I could not think of any other safe topic, so I was silent, and so was Maurice; I wondered if he, like me, was thinking of our last *tête-à-tête*. "Our conversational resources seem to be somewhat at a low ebb," he observed, after a very long and truly significant pause; "shall we talk about the weather?"

"I want to ask you something first, Maurice," I said, with a great effort, rising as I spoke, and feeling a large lump in my throat. "I have long wanted—wished, that is to say"—stammering pitifully—"will you forgive me making the request?" almost in a whisper.

"For what?" he asked with haughty composure.

"For deceiving you—for never telling you of my engagement; I always meant to; I did, indeed, but every day I put it off and put it off——" Here I blundered and hesitated once more. There was no occasion to let him know *why* it had been so hard to tell him. He preserved a grim silence that was anything but encouraging. "Surely you may forgive me *now*, Maurice," I urged imploringly.

"And why specially *now*?" he asked in a frozen tone.

"Because—because you are engaged yourself."

"I!" he ejaculated with a look of unqualified surprise, throwing away his cigarette and now devoting his whole attention to me. "And where, may I ask, did you hear this fine piece of news?"

"Oh, everyone knows it," I answered recklessly; "at least, most people do. We heard it months ago, at Mulka-pore. It is true, is it not?"

For quite a minute I received no answer.

"Yes—it is true," he slowly replied, with an odd smile on his face and without lifting his eyes from the ground; "rumour for once is right."

"She is a very pretty girl," I remarked, rather lamely, after cudgelling my brains mercilessly in the vain endeavour to bring forth some neat complimentary speech.

"She is," he responded composedly, regarding me at the same time with a look of curious amusement.

"I hope you will be very happy," I went on, twisting my new riding-whip into all manner of shapes.

"Thank you," he returned with a strange quiver of the lips.

Evidently, Maurice was not inclined to discourse very fluently on the subject of his bliss. I made one more effort.

"And when is it to be?" I asked timidly.

"Captain Beresford, Captain Beresford!" cried a high treble voice, coming down through the coffee.

"Where are you? Oh!" exclaimed Miss Ross breathlessly, holding her hand to her panting heart, as she caught sight of us. "I have had such a hunt for you; papa is in a terrible state of mind—one of his worst attacks of the fidgets; he says it is going to *pour*, and we are to be off at once; so come along, we have not an instant to lose. You will have to drag me up this horrible hill," she went on, still gasping. "I am very sorry to take you away from Miss Neville, but it can't be helped, unless you come with us," she said, turning to me, as if struck by a happy after-thought; "won't you come too?"

I need hardly remark that I emphatically declined this invitation—declined it with an energy that I afterwards reflected was hardly *polite*, but Miss Ross was in too great haste to notice any little social slackness on my part, and seizing Maurice by the arm, and with a brief farewell to me, she set off without loss of time.

I infinitely preferred awaiting the return of the water-party to enacting the rôle of "gooseberry." I sat moodily on a rock, like Patience smiling at Grief, whilst Miss Ross triumphantly carried off my late companion. I sat for a good while in one position, watching the pair till they had completely disappeared through the thick coffee-bushes.

What a happy, lucky girl Miss Ross was ! My heart burned with jealousy against her. I *hated* her ! I distinctly hated her for fully ten minutes. Then my better sense came into play, and my better self too. "Why," I asked myself, "should I envy and dislike her ? I had treated Maurice very, very badly, and he held me now in deserved contempt. He was free to choose for himself, and had chosen Miss Ross. No doubt she was as amiable as she was pretty, and would make him a far better wife than I would have done." My reflections were disturbed by the return of the sight-seers, and a moist hand laid on mine made me jump. It was Rody, seemingly not in the least damped by his wetting.

"You are a nice figure, I must say !" I observed contemptuously. "You will catch your death of cold ; you are wet through and through. How could you be so ridiculous ?"

"There will not be a pin to choose between us in ten minutes' time," was his cheerful rejoinder. "Look at the rain coming up from the plains. You will soon get a soaking ! Come, the sooner we make a start the better."

The dark clouds, rising mists, and low rumble of thunder verified his warning, and we all lost no time in scrambling back up the hill, and making rapid preparations for departure. How it poured ! first in a mild drizzle, then in an ordinary commonplace way, and then in sheets of rain, accompanied by blinding flashes of lightning. Uncle and I were almost the first to start. Rody had secured shelter in a bullock-bandy with his black-eyed belle, I having refused a very pressing invitation to occupy a fourth seat in the same luxurious conveyance. Uncle and I set off at a brisk canter, and before we had gone three miles we overtook the Rosses and Maurice. Miss Ross was enveloped in Maurice's mackintosh, and he was riding in close attendance at her side, whilst the General was pounding along alone, about fifty paces in front. The future Mrs. Beresford was a very timid rider, as a remarkable limpness in the saddle and convulsive clutching at her horse's head betokened to my practised eye ; and if her countenance was any guide, she was most distrustful of her position, and unhappy in her mind. My horse, "Cavalier," a fidgeting beast at the best of times, was almost pulling my arms out, and we were

barely past them, when a loud clap of thunder, and the simultaneous crash of a tree, drove him perfectly mad !

With a plunge that almost unseated me, he threw up his head, and nearly tearing the reins out of my wet, stiff hands—bolted. Uncle, fortunately, had sufficient sense not to follow me ; and, after a furious gallop of about two miles, the uphill road began to tell on my fiery animal, and at length I was able to pull him up, first to a canter and then to a walk.

I listened intently to hear if uncle was coming, but the rumble of the thunder, the roar of the trees, and the rushing of the rain, were the only audible sounds. “As it was getting late and dark, there was no use in waiting,” I said to myself, and cantered briskly on. Turning into the Lake road at a trot, the sound of a horse’s hoof on the soaking marshy grass beside me made me look round.

“I’m all right, Uncle Jim, you see,” I cried cheerfully ; “the reins were so slippery, I could not hold him. He has nearly pulled my arms out of their sockets, though.”

“I’m not your Uncle Jim,” said a well-known voice that made my heart jump, “he is coming on behind ; but I cantered up pretty smartly, as I was afraid you might have come to grief, meeting country carts and pack-bullocks. Thank God it was not Shandy-day, or you must have been killed.”

The light of a lamp fell on Maurice as he spoke—he was dripping, of course, and his horse was in a lather, equally of course ; but the livid pallor of his face was not so readily accounted for. Had I not known to the contrary, beyond all doubt or question, I might have supposed, from his anxious, almost distracted appearance, *that Maurice cared for me still.*

## CHAPTER XLII.

### THE PROPOSAL.

For I'll believe I have his heart, as much as he has mine.

THE wetting I got coming home from the picnic resulted in a severe cold, and I was confined to bed for more than a week. Very dull and feverish and stupid I felt, in spite of constant visits from Mrs. Vane, who, seated on the foot of my bed, daily unbosomed herself of all the news she could gather for my edification. She had been down at the A.B.C. Ground, and had had three sets of tennis played with a very so-so partner, and been beaten. Captain Beresford and Miss Ross were playing too; and she was not much either. Or she had met Captain Beresford and Miss Ross riding. Or she had seen them sitting together in the Library, or walking in the Government Garden. All the rest of her news fell on unheeding ears. The most startling current "gup," the most unlikely engagements, the most killing jokes, were lost on me. But the above casual remarks, dropped in the course of conversation, were just so many sore stabs, and, after she had left me to rest in perfect innocence of heart, I would lie awake nearly all night, trying to stanch these all but mortal wounds with the lint of common sense. No wonder that the doctor was surprised at my pale and languid appearance, and asked auntie very mysteriously if there was consumption in our family.

At last, after ten weary days in bed, I was promoted to the sofa in the drawing-room; every one made a great fuss about me, notably Colonel Vane, who half

lived on the road to the Library, changing my books, and who loaded me with all kinds of delicate attentions in the shape of fruit and flowers. I always got on with elderly people, and my friend's husband, a smart, dapper, spruce little man, and one of the most delightful companions I ever met, was no exception to the general rule.

"The way—the barefaced way—that you and George flit is really scandalous," Mrs. Vane would say; "I really shall have to send him to the club—to board him out! I declare it will come to that. He has sent off to Bombay for all the new songs for you. I told you" (triumphantly) "you would like my old man, did I not? You would never compare *him* to Major Per——"

"Don't name him," I interrupted, fretfully.

"Well, then, I won't vex you, my poor sick Nora. By the way, do you know that your cousin Maurice has been here nearly every day this week; he was closeted with Uncle Jim for nearly an hour yesterday. Shall I tell you the reason?" she said, coming over and kneeling beside me. "Shall I tell you?"

"If you like," I replied wearily. What did it matter to me now?

"I had such a long talk with him the night before last at the Morrisons' dance, and I told him the whole history about Major Percival. He had never heard the rights of it before."

"Well?" I asked eagerly.

"Well, my dear child, he was simply furious. Those people with dark gray eyes *can* look angry if you like. He was in a kind of white, cool, polite passion, and asked me, 'Who had horsewhipped your *fiancé*?' Did you ever hear of such a joke? I referred him to your uncle, and I have no doubt that they mutually enjoyed a grand letting off of steam. Any way, you are not quite so much in his black books as you were, for he *did* think that the blow up was all your fault. Give a dog a bad name, you know," nodding her head.

"It is not much matter what he thinks—*now*," I added to myself faintly, turning my face away from the light, and imitating Mrs. Roper's manoeuvre with my fan.

"Don't talk nonsense, Noah! I have a presentiment that you will marry your cousin in spite of all your ill-doings; you will be the handsomest couple in the Presidency, and I shall dance at your wedding," she added with decision.

"You don't know what you are saying, Violet," I exclaimed, sitting up and pushing back my heavy hair. "Never think of such a thing. Maurice is engaged."

"If you mean to Miss Ross, I do not believe it. They are on far too easy, friendly terms. There is not an atom of love between them. He is as much engaged to her as *I* am," she concluded emphatically, "no more in love with her than the man in the moon," contemptuously.

"Perhaps you know best," I answered ironically; "all I can say is, that I had my information from Maurice himself; he *ought* to know."

"From himself?" she repeated with a very blank face, collapsing at once into a sitting posture on the floor, embracing her knees and looking at me with widely opened incredulous eyes; "when did you hear this?"

"At the picnic," I answered shortly, once more sinking back among my pillows.

"Well," she said, jumping up, and beginning to walk up and down the room with great energy; "*I am* surprised! I am amazed; I am confounded! I don't know what to make of him."

"What to make of whom, madam?" inquired Colonel Vane, entering the room in dinner garb.

"What to make of Nora's cousin, Captain Beresford," she replied, walking up to her husband, and sticking a rose in his button-hole.

"The same as every man, you know, myself included—make a fool of him, to be sure."

"Be quiet, George; this is no joking matter. For once, your sweet, clever, pretty little wife"—laying her hands on his shoulders, and looking him full in the face—"did you hear me, sir?—your sweet, pretty, clever little wife is completely up a tree?"

There were three days' racing at Ooty, or rather at the Pykara road, three miles away. The first day it poured, and spoiled the sport, people's good dresses, and people's



good tempers. It is not conducive to a merry mood to be standing under an umbrella (and receiving the drippings of about four others) in sheets of rain, with your favourite boots in a puddle, and your smartest frock becoming every moment further advanced on the road to ruin. Even with a companion—a pleasant companion—under the same silken shelter (cotton or alpaca *parapluies* don't exist even in my imagination), even with these extenuating circumstances, I deny that a wet day's racing is either pleasant or profitable. The last day of the races was fine; crowds ventured forth in their second best. Uncle and I rode, and auntie and Mrs. Vane went in a large hired open carriage. Mrs. Vane and I shared the box on the course, and had a splendid view. The start was down-hill; certainly it was a most uninviting piece of ground; but, considering everything, was wonderfully flat for the hills. Maurice won a hurdle-race, and Rody was a good second for the "Planters' Cup." Altogether I had been extremely interested, and had lost a pair of spectacles to Uncle Jim and won a pair of riding-gloves from Mrs. Vane.

"They are getting up a race for 'ladies horses'—horses here on the course, to be ridden by gentlemen nominated by the owners," said Rody, swinging himself up on the fore-wheel beside me. "Beresford wants to know, Nora, if you'd like him to ride your horse? He won't have half a bad chance!"

"Are you going to enter 'Cavalier?'" inquired Maurice, coming up at this moment, "because if you care about it, I'll ride him. There are five entries already, but only one of them has any turn of speed, and I think 'Cavalier' could show him the way."

"Yes, and that conceited little beggar, Tommy Pim, is going to steer him, and he is swaggering all over the place, telling the ladies to put the gloves on and back *his* mount. If you beat him, Beresford, I shall skip like a young lamb!" cried Rody encouragingly.

"Well, Nora, have you made up your mind? The stewards are giving a very handsome bracelet. It is actually here on the ground. You may as well have a shot for it as anyone else," said Maurice. "Am I to enter Miss Neville's 'Cavalier?'"

"Yes. I should like it very much," I replied hesi-

tatingly; "but you know, Rody can ride for me. You will have to ride for Miss Ross!"

"Bosh! Why should he ride for Miss Ross?" interrupted Rody rudely. "Anyway, her 'gee' is no good, and not going to run."

"Very well, then. Maurice, if you will ride for me, I shall be very much obliged to you."

"All right," he returned; "there's no time to be lost. Come along French;" and the two young men hurried off at once in quest of Cavalier, who, half asleep, nodding his head over his squatting syce, little dreamt of the treat and honour that were in store for him.

There were six competitors altogether, and they went away to a capital start. I stood on the box, holding on by Mrs. Vane, and literally quivering with excitement as they tore down the hill close by, Cavalier third. Round the sweep at the bottom he was pulling up fast; and it was evident that he and a very handsome grey Arab had the race between them. It was nearly a dead heat as they ran into the straight—almost locked together; but, thanks to Maurice's superior jockeyship, Cavalier won by a head!

"Hoorosh! hooray!" cried Rody, who had also shared the box-seat—and almost upset me twice. "Ireland for ever!" he shouted exultantly, as he leapt down, and dashed into the crowd.

"That boy will certainly have to be consigned to a lunatic asylum yet," exclaimed Mrs. Vane, as she shut up her parasol. "'Hoorosh, hooray,' indeed! He has carried off half the lace-frilling at the bottom of my dress, and nearly knocked me down!"

Many of our friends came up to the carriage and congratulated me on my success; and after a little Maurice, uncle, and Rody arrived—a triumphant trio.

"There's your bracelet, Nora," said Maurice, tossing up the case into my lap. It was certainly very handsome, and I was immediately beset by a considerable crowd, thirsting to see the prize. Auntie and Mrs. Vane were in ecstasies with it, and Rody actually tried to clasp it on his sunburnt wrist. When I turned to make my acknowledgments to Maurice, he was gone!

"The ladies' race" was the last event of the day, and soon heavily-laden carriages commenced to leave the course.

Uncle insisted on my driving home, and in a short time we were also under weigh, having previously offered a seat to Rody, which he declined.

"Barney Magee is going to drive me home, and Beresford too; Barney has a nailing good horse, and I'm going to drive; you see if I don't pass everything on the road. I'll be in Ooty before you can say 'Jack Robinson.'"

As we drove out of the enclosure we were passed at a rapid pace by Rody, Maurice, and a hare-brained Irish boy, in a very high dog-cart, with a very high-stepping steed. "Good-bye," cried Rody, sportively saluting us with his whip, "I'll let them know you are coming. I suppose you'll be in to breakfast to-morrow." This was a cruel gibe at our hired horses, who were certainly anything but free-goers. It seemed to me that Rody was a most rash and reckless driver, judging by the way he flourished his whip about, and whirled round corners. It was all a gentle slope downhill now, and our horses' heads being set towards home, they trotted along at a good pace and held their own well. After we had gone about a mile we found the road blocked in front, and subsided to a slow jog. I was seated with my back to the horses of course, as became my youth. As I sat nursing my bracelet and indulging in a brown study, a shout and a loud crash on the road ahead of us caused me to start.

"Hallo!" cried a gentleman, who was riding past; "I say, that's a bad accident!"

"What is it?" I inquired, jumping up and looking over the coach-box. I shall never forget the sight that met my eyes. I saw the horse and dog-cart that Maurice and Rody were driving rolling down the steep "kud," or precipice, at the side of the road—a fall of more than one hundred feet. Over and over it went. I saw it turn over three times, and I could look no longer.

"The horse took fright and shied, and jumped over the bank!" explained the stranger, with a pallid face. "I'll go on and see if I can lend any assistance," he added, cantering ahead.

I looked at auntie and Mrs. Vane, and then made a movement to spring out of the carriage after him.

"Stay where you are, child," said auntie, seizing my arm; "it may not be so bad as it looks."

But, in spite of her reassuring speech, her face was as pale as death, and her lips were quivering.

"They were all thrown out on the road, I'm sure," said Mrs. Vane, taking both my hands in hers and squeezing them tightly. We were four carriages away from the scene, and the road was now quite jammed with horses, and people on foot running past excitedly.

"I must go, I *will* go!" I said, struggling; "anything is better than this awful suspense."

"You will be only in the way," exclaimed auntie; "have patience, the gentleman will bring us word immediately. You may be sure your uncle is there. Now, Nora, I *insist*," holding me back.

Patience! It was easy to say patience when every second seemed a year of agony.

At last the stranger returned; his florid face was ashy white, and his lips were working nervously as he moved his horse close up to the carriage.

"Well?" we all said in a breath, "what has happened? Is anyone hurt?"

"It is a bad business," he replied gravely; "two of the fellows are not much the worse, but the third, a fellow called Beresford, who was caught in the reins——"

"Yes, what of him?" asked Mrs. Vane, in a voice that seemed far away.

"He has been killed stone dead."

I heard no more. There came a strange rushing and buzzing in my ears, and I fainted—for the first time in all my life.

How long I remained in this state I cannot say, but when I came to myself I was lying on a carriage rug on the grass at the side of the road. Auntie, with an anxious face, was chafing one hand and Mrs. Vane the other. The neck of my habit was open, and I felt very cold and wet about my face and hair.

"Where am I?" I said, coming to with a long sigh. "What is the matter?" I cried, endeavouring to start up. "Oh!" as recollection came, "oh!" I said, covering my face with my hands and shuddering with horror, "I remember all."

"Nora, my dear child," said auntie, "it was not as bad as you thought. He is not——"

"Not killed!" I gasped, removing my hands and looking at her with intense anxiety.

"I'm as good as two dead men yet, Nora," said a voice beside me, and there, unless my eyes deceived me, stood Maurice, with concern and amazement plainly depicted in his face. He was bleeding from a cut in the temple; his arm was bound up in an impromptu sling; his face was pale, and his coat all torn and covered with earth, but nevertheless, he was most palpably *alive*!

Oh! the relief of that moment! Oh! the long long breath I took! The revulsion of feeling was such that I very nearly fainted for a second time—with *joy*.

There was no doubt that I had disgraced myself. I had thought that Maurice was dead, and had fainted in the most open and notorious manner on the high-road. And here he was! alive, and looking at me with grave and anxious eyes!

What would he think of me? What could he think of me? Well, at any rate, merely as my cousin, I had a *right* to faint for him; he was a near relative, and an old friend. I hoped he would consider that, and not think—and not think—what? I did not choose to mention the other alternative, even to myself. I made a rapid recovery, and, assisted by auntie and uncle, resumed my hat and staggered to the carriage, feeling most fearfully ashamed of myself. Maurice was offered, and accepted, a seat home; and now the whole particulars of the accident were told. No one was much hurt; but the horse was killed, and the dog-cart lay one hundred and fifty feet below the road, smashed to atoms. Rody had escaped with a few bruises. Barney had occupied the back seat, and got off scot free, having jumped out when he felt the horse rising to the bank. "Faith," he said naively, "when I saw that the beast was inclined to kill himself and us, says I to myself, 'I'll be no party to the transaction,' and I made myself scarce." Maurice had been entangled in the reins, and had come off worst; but by some miracle the second roll over freed him, and he was lucky enough to escape with a few cuts and bruises and a sprained wrist; he had been stunned at first, and seeing him lying so pale and motionless, and gathering a hint from the excited crowd—always prepared to make the worst of a similar catastrophe, our stranger acquaintance

had brought us bad news post haste. As we passed the scene of the late disaster, I could not restrain a shudder as I saw the broken bank, the torn-up ground, and far away down below, the red wheels of the dog-cart, and a brown inanimate mass.

"You thought I was killed, did you, Nora?" said Maurice, with an odd kind of tremble in his usually steady voice.

"Of course I did," I answered rather crossly.

"How did it happen? tell us all about it," said Mrs. Vane, impatiently. "I don't know when I got such a fright."

"Oh, it was partly Rody's fault; he drives like 'Jehu, the son of Nimshi,' and in a happy-go-lucky fashion. I only wonder we were not upset before. I never saw such a reckless whip. He thought he was driving the twig, I dare say," he added, looking at me. "Any way, when we came to a block in the road, he tried to pull up sharp, and, to settle the matter, gave the horse a cut of the whip. He made one bound, broke the reins, and, feeling his head free, turned sharp round and jumped the ditch in a second. I shall not easily forget the sensation of going across country on wheels."

"And where is Rody now?" asked auntie, very sternly.

"Looking after the remains of the dog-cart and the carcass of the horse. Unfortunately, both were borrowed. Barney Magee had only 'the lend of the loan of them' himself."

"And Rody will have to pay for them?" I cried in dismay, "and he has not a rupee left. He told me he had drawn his month's pay in advance. Wretched boy, what will he do?"

"We will all pay," said Maurice carelessly.

"For having your necks nearly broken by that wild boy?" cried auntie, who was extremely wroth with Rody.

"It was altogether an accident, Mrs. Neville. Indeed you must not be angry with Rody."

"Well, thank God that none of you were killed. It's not his fault that you were not."

"We had an extraordinary escape. When I look down the place we went over I can hardly understand how we live to tell the tale."

I was silent nearly all the way home. I felt tired and sick, and altogether upset. Mrs. Vane, Maurice, and auntie chattered away together, just like old times. His spirits were as high as ever this evening, and he seemed bent on restoring Rody to auntie's good graces. The time passed like five minutes instead of half-an-hour, and we found ourselves at home. Maurice declined to come in, and took leave of us at the gate. He shook hands with auntie, with Mrs. Vane, and, lastly, with me. Holding my hand in his, he said: "Nora, I hope you will be all right to-morrow, and able to come to the Club ball. Keep a dance for *me*," he whispered in a lower tone, as the carriage moved on, and he disappeared.

"Keep a dance for me; keep a dance for me," kept lingering in my ears till it lost all sense and meaning. I tried to understand what it meant—what Maurice meant; Maurice, who treated me with the gravest, most frozen politeness on every occasion. And now he said, "Keep a dance *for me*." A good night's rest, a long, long sleep, restored me completely; and the next morning I was quite myself once more. Of course the races and the accident were abundantly discussed and talked about, and many were the visitors who came to see the bracelet and hear about the upset. As we dawdled over our five o'clock tea, Rody presented himself and endeavoured to carry off the accident with a high hand. But it was of no use. We scolded him well, and did our utmost to terrify him, with prospect of an enormous bill for damages, and perhaps a law-suit into the bargain.

"Oh, that's all right," he said with a knowing grin, totally unmoved by our apprehensions on his behalf.

"Why, you *know* you haven't four annas, much less fourteen hundred rupees," I cried in indignant amazement.

"Never you mind, Miss Curiosity! it's not going to come out of *your* pocket. It's going to be all right; and the dog-cart can be mended."

The fact was, that Maurice was to pay, as I afterwards discovered. Maurice had reasons of his own for being in an unusually generous humour.

"And so you fainted!" observed Rody, pointedly. "That was a pretty business, and all owing to alarm and anxiety of mind on *my* behalf!"

"No, indeed, it was not. 'Naught was never in danger,'" I replied rashly.

"Then you must have been overcome on Beresford's account! Phew!" and he gave a long, shrill, ear-piercing whistle. "Sits the wind in that quarter? Well, there's nothing like beginning with a little aversion—or, indeed, a good deal. I leave him in your hands with the utmost confidence. You can avenge us of that loft business when you are married to him, Nora! I've never forgiven him to this day."

"Rody," I exclaimed, reddening, "you are unbearable. Your rudeness and vulgarity are intolerable."

"You would like to box my ears, just as you did in the good old times; now, wouldn't you? But hark! He comes! as they say in the play. Enter the hero of the piece—*exeunt*" (waving his hands) "all minor characters—hero and heroine—love scene—tableau!"

"Hush, hush. Do be quiet, you horrid boy!" said Mrs. Vane to the irrepressible youth, as at that moment uncle and Maurice walked into the veranda.

I only remained long enough to give them each a cup of tea, and then, with an excuse of the vaguest description, I effected my exit. Rody, with Maurice in the room, was a good deal more than I could stand; so I fled to my own snuggerly, and looked at my finery for the evening. Drugo had already spread my ball-dress on the bed; it was a combination of black tulle and black satin, and large ox-eyed daisies, and was both beautiful and new; my long black gloves and satin shoes reposed side by side with my fan and handkerchief, and my bouquet stood on the dressing-table in a tumbler of water. Nothing was left for *me* to do. I dared not return to the drawing-room, it opened on the same veranda as my room, and I could distinctly hear Rody's loud hilarious laugh leading the van in all the mirth. They were evidently enjoying themselves very much, I thought regretfully; but to return to brave Rody, and to be quizzed about Maurice before his very face, was beyond the limits of my endurance!

Behold us at the ball, and at a large and very gay ball! Everything had been done on a magnificent scale you could see at a glance. Although there were fewer tents and not



so much outside decoration as we found on similar occasions in the warm and sunny plains, yet large suites of rooms had been thrown open, and everything arranged in a quiet unostentatious way, to promote facilities for flirtation. Chairs, in twos and threes, were grouped or scattered about in the most subtle and sentimental situations. A profusion of flowers and plants met our eyes on all sides. The ball-room itself was enough to compel the most obstinate male "wall-flower" to take the floor, and the lighting and band were perfection.

The room was already tolerably crowded when we entered. Auntie, in black velvet and point lace, looking the queen of chaperons; Mrs. Vane, bewitching in gray tulle and scarlet geraniums; and I, as before hinted, in black—black was always becoming to me! at least, so I had been told.

"*Le noir est si flatteur pour les blondes.*" The only colour about me was my bouquet. I wore my race-bracelet and diamond solitaire earrings, and a large diamond star—a most extravagant present from Uncle Jim my last birthday. Poor Uncle Jim! I am sure he thought he was making up to me, in a small way, for all the splendid jewels I had relinquished along with Major Percival.

I glanced round the room and saw Maurice dancing with Miss Ross, of course. I mentally observed, "I put him down in my programme for number eight," and then proceeded to fill my card. The first Lancers were Rody's due; as I flatly refused to dance a round one with him, telling him "that it would be worse than going into action," for his wild bounds and frantic rushes were a sight, once seen, never forgotten. The square dances were few and far between, and ours was preceded by a couple of waltzes; but the instant "Trial by Jury" struck up, Rody came over to where I was standing with my late partner, and almost hauled me off to take my place at the top of the set.

"Do you know, Nora, joking apart," looking round the room and pretending to stand on his tiptoes, and then staring hard at me, "I believe you are about the best-looking girl here to-night; really—bar jokes."

"You *don't* mean it, Rody!" I answered impressively.

"Yes, and you took the shine out of them at the races, too. Kilcool for ever, I say. I wonder what Sweetlips,

and Dan, and Patsey would think if they could have a squint at you now? They would never know you. Look here," he gabbled on as we returned to our places after visiting, "you ought to make a good match, you know, and marry some heavy swell with heaps of coin, and keep lots of first-class hunters, and offer a perennial welcome to old friends."

"You may consider yourself certain of a welcome and a mount, Rody."

"Listen to me, Nora," he said, coming very close, and speaking in a low mysterious whisper; "you know very well that I am a rough, awkward fellow, but I am your friend, and I look upon you as just as much my sister as Deb."

"Of course you do," I returned with conviction. "It would be very odd if you did not."

"Well, I only wanted to say a word in your ear; maybe I'm putting my foot in it, but you won't be offended with me, will you?" apprehensively.

"No," I replied, laughing, "you may trust me, I won't be offended. You were not *always* so mindful of my feelings!"

Yet what was the boy going to say? Vivid recollections of his various social blunders rose before my mind's eye. Wretched Rody had a fearful knack of inquiring after the wrong people, and saying the wrong things to the wrong person.

"Then here goes: *Don't* set your young affections on Maurice Beresford. He is a rare good fellow, I know—a brick of the first water; but he is going the pace, and no mistake, with that scraggy, black-looking Miss Ross."

Rody, in the character of a mentor, was something new.

"Thank you," I replied, inwardly somewhat disconcerted, but with tolerable outward equanimity. "There is no need to warn me. I know that Maurice is engaged, he told me so himself."

"Did he?" ejaculated Rody, staring at me hard with his little, round, intelligent eyes. "Humph," he muttered; "I don't think much of his taste."

"*Chacun à son goût.* Some day you will choose for

yourself, and maybe we won't think much of your taste. Every eye forms its own beauty."

"It would be a queer eye that would form any beauty out of Miss Ross," he retorted contemptuously.

"Come, come, Rody, why are you so bitter and so hard to please? even I, a *lady*, think her very handsome. Now here's the grand chain, and we are outside, and for mercy's sake keep there."

At last it was Maurice's dance. After we had taken several turns we paused for a little, and looked on. We discussed the music, criticised the dresses, and praised the floor. I observed Miss Ross, in a primrose-coloured gauze, leaning against the opposite wall, and conversing with her partner—a man with mere whiskers, and no moustache—with unusual animation.

"How well your *fiancée* looks to-night! What a pretty girl she is!" I remarked—the subject of his engagement had a hideous and irresistible fascination for me.

"She is," replied Maurice, glancing, not at Miss Ross, but at *me*, with a look of grave, critical inspection.

"If she is as nice as she looks," I continued, somewhat embarrassed by his steady gaze, "I am sure you will be very happy, and you have my best—wishes." I had made this little speech with no small effort, but I had said it, and said it with a smile.

"Thank you very much," he replied composedly, scribbling vaguely on his programme with an odd expression on his face.

"She admires this bracelet," holding up my wrist, "and I intend to order a similar one for her at Orr's as my wedding present."

"Your good wishes and present are very kindly intended, Nora. But are you quite certain that you know the lady to whom I am engaged?"

"Oh yes, of course I do," I answered quickly. "Miss Ross; I know her slightly as it is, and I hope to know her better ere long."

"Miss Ross! Certainly not; she is engaged. That part of the story is quite correct—engaged to the gentleman she is dancing with; he is a naval officer on the China station, and an old schoolfellow of mine. He arrived here yester-

day, and as soon as we return to Chcetapore the wedding will take place. And so you thought I was engaged to Miss Ross?"

"I must confess I did, so do most people, you seem such friends."

"So we are, I like her extremely. She is a particularly nice girl, and being her father's A.D.C., and her intended's former schoolfellow, we have seen a great deal of each other, and consequently society leaps at the conclusion that we are engaged! I wonder how Rockfield would relish the intelligence?"

"Then if it is not Miss Ross, to whom *are* you engaged? Surely, Maurice, you will tell me her name. I should like to know her. I should like to be friends with my future cousin."

"Should you really like to see her? Would you care to be introduced to her *now*—this evening?" he asked very earnestly.

"I should," I replied firmly. "Yes, very much indeed. Is she here?" looking round with a sinking heart.

"Come along then," offering his arm and leading me into the corridor, where dozens of couples were walking and sitting and standing, now that the waltz had wailed out its very last bars. As we proceeded down the lobby, steering in and out among the crowd, I made a rapid mental review of all the girls on the hills.

Who *could* it be? Not Laura Jenkins; he had never spoken six words to her. Not Miss Farquhar; he had only seen her twice. Who *could* it be?

"I think you will find her in here," said Maurice, pushing open a door, and ushering me into a small boudoir. It was perfectly empty. I looked eagerly round—not a soul to be seen but ourselves.

"Well, where is she?" I asked impatiently; "you see she is not here."

"Yes, there she is, right behind you," he answered coolly. "Allow me to present you to an old friend."

I turned with a violent start, and, in a long mirror between two windows, I confronted a full length reflection of *myself*—myself, with earnest, expectant expression and parted lips, grasping my fan in one hand and my bouquet

in the other. Quickly recovering, I turned round and said : " If you intend this for a *joke*, Cousin Maurice, I fail to see the point. What do you mean ? " I inquired, looking at him indignantly.

" It is no joke, but sober, solemn sense, I assure you," he returned, leaning his arm on the back of a high chair, and encountering my gaze with perfect equanimity.

" Now you have seen my *fiancée*, come and sit down here," motioning me towards the sofa, " and tell me what you think of her. Is she likely to be as nice as she is pretty ? Is there any chance of your being good friends ? Come," he said, taking me by the hand, and speaking with unusual earnestness, " come, and let us sit down and talk it all over."

" Maurice, how can you ? " I stammered, divided equally between a desire to laugh and to cry. " What are you thinking of ? You must be mad ! I am not engaged to you."

" No, but I am pledged to *you*. I gave your grandfather my solemn word of honour to marry you ; you heard me yourself ; to marry no one else while you were single. Nothing but your marriage with another man can free me."

" You are not bound to me in any way," I urged impetuously ; " and if you are waiting for your release till I marry, you will wait a long time. I mean to live and die an old maid."

" Really ! " looking down on me with an expression of amused incredulity.

" Believe me, Maurice, I am perfectly in earnest. I have, as you know, a happy home and kind friends. Grandfather's bargain no longer applies to me. I am even better off than he imagined I should be. Do not think of me. And if there is any one you *really* care for, I implore you not to be held back by that rash, foolish vow. I'm sure grandfather was doting when he exacted such a promise. I should be miserable—most miserable—all my life, if I thought that I was standing between you and your happiness. Take your release from *me*. I give it to you in grandfather's name," tendering my bouquet in my excitement.

I made this long speech with breathless haste, and with all the eagerness and earnestness I could command, Maurice meanwhile surveying me with marked attention.

"Is your decision final, Nora? Are you fully resolved to be an old maid? Have you considered the matter well? You are only twenty."

"I have!" I replied firmly.

"Could *no one* tempt you to change your mind?" his eyes imperatively fastened on mine.

I shook my head with great resolution.

"No one?" he repeated with emphasis, still standing before me.

Then bending lower, and forcibly removing my fan, to which my eyes were glued, he proceeded:

"Look at me, Nora, and tell me 'the truth, and nothing but the truth.'"

I looked up (please be lenient), fully prepared to tell a falsehood.

"*Could I?*" he whispered.

For all answer I covered my face with my hands.

"Come," he said, sitting down beside me on the sofa.

"I am not going to take silence for consent *this* time. Nora, which is it to be, yes or no?"

"Yes," I replied, almost under my breath.

"Then why did you tell me such a story just now—such a flagrant, unblushing fib?"

"Because—because—I did not. I meant that I would marry no one—but you. But you scarcely expected me to *tell* you so," I stammered, recovering my senses and my tongue.

"I don't see why you should not; it is leap year," responded Maurice, coolly fanning himself with my property.

"I declare, sir," I exclaimed, between laughing and crying, "nothing like your impudence was ever heard in all the annals of proposals."

"You must remember that this is the *second* time I have asked you, my dear Nora. The first time I was a little nervous, certainly, but I find that it's nothing when you're used to it."

"Why did you ask me a second time, when I behaved so badly to you the first?" I asked impulsively.

"Oh, why do people do lots of foolish things? Why, for instance, are you going to give me a kiss, and that door most invitingly ajar?"

"I am *not* going to do anything of the sort," I exclaimed, flushing crimson, and moving precipitately away.

"Oh, well, *I* have no such scruples," returned Maurice, calmly suiting the action to the word. "I'm not robbing anyone else this time, am I? You are not secretly engaged, are you?"

"Don't," I cried, almost in tears; "I know I richly deserve it, but I can't bear it," I concluded, almost breaking down.

"Well, then, we will make a fresh start, Nora," he said, taking my hand; "we won't say how badly you treated me once upon a time, or how frightfully cut up I was—we will let bygones be bygones. When I heard that your engagement was broken off, like the poor foolish moth, I came back again to the candle to try my luck, and when they told me that you were up here I threw up the last of my leave and followed you. I was off my shooting altogether too; I could not hold a rifle straight, thanks to thinking of *you*, so I left the other fellows at Bandipore and came up, just to have a look round and see how the land lay."

"Yes, go on," I said, smiling through my tears, and gradually recovering my self-possession.

"Well, I did not think much of my chance, I can assure you, and only yesterday it dawned upon me that I had a *faint* one."

"If you are going to make bad puns, Maurice, I tell you solemnly that I'll have nothing to do with you. You know what Dr. Johnson said."

"All right, Nora, I'll make a bargain with you. I'll give up making puns—which is by no means a severe deprivation, as they are not at all in my line—and *you*—will give up flirting."

"I never flirt," I replied, sniffing at my bouquet.

"O—o—oh! What, *never*?"

"Well, hardly ever," I replied, bursting out laughing. "But, seriously, I don't think I ever did flirt—intentionally."

"A flirting wife is an abomination," said Maurice quite gravely, "and as I believe I have enormous resources of latent jealousy in my disposition, we should never 'get on.'"

"Make your mind quite easy about me, Maurice. I

shall never give you any anxiety on that score ; I mean to be a model."

"You said that you would rather *die* than marry me!" Maurice remarked mischievously. "And now, what do you say? Say something nice, Nora," he added pleadingly ; "I'm sure I deserve it, if ever a fellow did."

"I say — I say — that I believe I would die if you married *anyone else*. Will that suit you?" I answered, turning my head away to conceal my blushes. I have every reason to know that Maurice was gratified with this remark. We had a great deal to say to one another—a *very* great deal. At last it occurred to me that there were other inhabitants of the globe besides ourselves, and those other inhabitants included at least half-a-dozen of my much ill-used partners.

"We really must go back to the ball-room, Maurice," I said at length.

"Yes, I suppose we ought to make a move," he returned discontentedly ; "but," brightening, "of course you will dance with me for the rest of the evening."

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the sort. I'm engaged for every dance! If you behave very decorously, I may go down to supper with you—and I may not," I said, rising and walking over to the glass, and giving myself a last fond look as I turned to leave the room.

"Well, is she as pretty as you expected?" said Maurice, surveying my reflection with a triumphant smile. "Look here, Nora," he added, with his hand on the door, "my leave is up in a fortnight."

"But you can easily get more," I returned.

"Not so easily as you imagine. Listen to me," he continued, facing me. "I mean to be married in a month. A month will give you lots of time to get your finery ; a trousseau is all nonsense in my opinion. However, I'll wait a month," with an air of great generosity.

"A month!" I cried. "Why not say to-morrow, at once?" I added ironically. "I never heard of such absurdity. We have been engaged about ten minutes, and you talk of being married in a month. A likely tale!"

"We have been engaged exactly seven years, and in four weeks time you will find yourself Mrs. Beresford," he replied inflexibly.



"Well, I'm sure!" I gasped. "I——"

"So am I; quite sure," he interrupted, pushing the door wide open in order to permit me to pass out, thus bringing the argument to a conclusion, and denying me the privilege of the last word. The lobby was crowded, and almost the first person we encountered was Rody.

"Now, *this* is what I call really very nice," he exclaimed, scrutinising us with folded arms. Are you aware that you have been absent these four dances, Nora, that all the stewards are out in the compound looking for you with lanterns, and that a select body of your partners have gone down to drag the lake?"

"You don't mean to say so. What fun!" I replied with unusual animation.

"Ha! what have you been about?" he asked, as if struck by some new idea. "To judge from your face you have come in for a fortune!"

"My face *is* my fortune!" I returned promptly.

"I'm not at all so sure of *that*. We all know that old Uncle Jim is a rich man, and——" I fancy that a glance at Maurice revealed the truth, for he suddenly paused, seized him eagerly by the hand, exclaiming:

"I'll see you through it, old fellow; I'll walk you up the plank; I'll be your best man with pleasure."

"Indeed you won't," returned Maurice resolutely; "goodness knows *what* practical joke might occur to your lively imagination. No; very many thanks. I have a steady, respectable gunner in my mind's eye, who will, I hope, fill that arduous post." Our prolonged absence had been noted by Mrs. Vane and auntie; the former gave me a significant look as she floated by, and I was immediately seized upon by an ill-used partner, and hurried away into the crowd myself.

I found time to whisper to auntie, during a pause in the waltz. Dear old lady, how pleased she looked! I noticed Uncle Jim and Maurice in solemn conclave in a doorway, and for once I am convinced that the topic of the conversation was not *shikar*. The evening came to an end at last—came to an end only too soon. As long as I live I shall always have tender recollections of that Club ball.

Well, who was right?" said Mrs. Vane, following me

into my room, holding her candle up quite close to my rosy cheeks, and surveying me most complacently. "This is rather better than the *last* affair? Eh?" she added triumphantly. "Well, I won't trample on you now you are down, but I was right and you were wrong, you wicked old antediluvian!"

Now that I have told my story, there is no need to linger over insignificant details. It was settled that Maurice was to take six months' leave, and we were to revisit Gallow, *viâ* Italy and France. Rody (who was also going home on furlough) and Deb were to meet us there, and we were to have a grand "rendezvous" under the old beech-tree, and exhume the bottle! Six of the prettiest girls in Ooty were to be my bridesmaids; and who should be my principal attendant to the altar to hold my gloves and bouquet——?

Who but Miss Ross!

Different people said different things—a great deal too kind and much undeserved, as far as I was concerned; and presents were showered on us by many generous hands.

Uncle was delighted; "it was too good to be true," he declared ten times a day. Mrs. Vane said, "she always knew how it would be." Mrs. Fox said, "that it was no great match after all! Only a captain in the Horse Artillery, and by all accounts, as poor as a rat." Rody said, "It beat Banagher." Mrs. Gower said, "that Miss Neville was engaged to a different man every time she went to the hills, and she would believe in no wedding unless she *saw* it!" Maurice said—— No. You can't expect me to tell you what Maurice said. I say, that I am the happiest girl under the Southern Cross, and that after next week there will be no longer such a person as—  
PRETTY MISS NEVILLE.

THE END.



NEW WORKS  
ON  
HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT

---

**NOW READY.**

*The Third Edition of*

FROM KITCHEN TO GARRET :  
HINTS TO YOUNG HOUSEKEEPERS.

By Mrs. PANTON.

Cloth gilt. Bevelled boards. 6s.

---

COMMON SENSE IN THE NURSERY.

By MARION HARLAND.

Fancy cloth. 2s. 6d.

---

Dr. STRAUSS'S COOKERY BOOK.  
DISHES & DRINKS; OR, PHILOSOPHY  
IN THE KITCHEN.

Cloth lettered. 2s. 6d.

“The most recommendable book on cookery that has been published for many a long day.”—*Saturday Review*.

---

LONDON :  
WARD & DOWNEY,  
**Publishers,**  
12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.

## ILLUSTRATED BOOKS SUITABLE FOR PRESENTS OR PRIZES.

---

THROUGH GREEN GLASSES. By F. M. ALLEN.  
Illustrations by M. FITZGERALD. Cloth gilt. 6s.

THE STORY OF ANTHONY GRACE. By G. MAN-  
VILLE FENN. Illustrations by GORDON BROWNE. Cloth gilt,  
bevelled boards. 6s.

VERDI, MILAN, AND "OTHELLO." By BLANCHE  
ROOSEVELT. With Eighteen whole-page Illustrations. Cloth  
gilt. 7s. 6d.

AT THE RED GLOVE. By KATHARINE S. MACQUOID.  
Illustrations by C. S. REINHART. Cloth gilt. 6s.

TRAVELS IN THE INTERIOR; OR, THE WON-  
DERFUL ADVENTURES OF LUKE AND BELINDA.  
Illustrations by HARRY FURNISS. Cloth gilt, bevelled boards.  
6s.

JOHN O' LONDON: a Story of the Days of Roger  
Bacon. By SOMERVILLE GIBNEY. Illustrations by M. FITZ-  
GERALD. Cloth gilt, bevelled boards. 6s.

FOLK AND FAIRY TALES. By Mrs. BURTON  
HARRISON. With twenty-four original whole-page Illustrations  
by WALTER CRANE. 2nd Edition. Crown 8vo. In hand-  
somely designed cover, gilt edges. 6s.

CATHEDRAL DAYS: a Tour through Southern  
England. By ANNA BOWMAN DODD. With Illustrations from  
Sketches and Photographs. 6s.

OLD COURT LIFE IN FRANCE. By Mrs. FRANCES  
ELLIOTT. With twenty-one original whole-page Illustrations  
Royal 8vo. 7s. 6d.

FIFTY YEARS OF A GOOD QUEEN'S REIGN.  
By A. H. WALL. With six Portraits. Imp. 16mo. Cloth,  
3s. 6d.; bevelled boards, gilt edges. 4s. 6d.

---

Ward & Downey, Publishers, 12, York Street, Covent Garden.

## SHILLING NOVELS.

---

AN IMPECUNIOUS LADY. By Mrs. FORRESTER.  
THE GREAT HESPER. By FRANK BARRETT.  
A BAG OF DIAMONDS. By G. M. FENN.  
THE DARK HOUSE. By G. M. FENN. 3rd Edition.  
EVE AT THE WHEEL. By G. M. FENN.  
THE CHAPLAIN'S CRAZE. By G. M. FENN.  
LITTLE TU'PENNY. By the Author of "Mehalah."  
A HOUSE OF TEARS. By E. DOWNEY. 12th Edition.  
LADY VALWORTH'S DIAMONDS. By the Author  
of "Phyllis." Third Edition.  
A PRINCE OF DARKNESS. By the Author of  
"The House on the Marsh." Fifth Edition.  
THE SKELETON KEY. By R. DOWLING.  
MOLKA. By B. L. FARJEON.  
OLIVER'S BRIDE. By Mrs. OLIPHANT.

---

\* \* A series of "Half-Crown Novels" will be issued shortly by Messrs. WARD & DOWNEY, comprising works by the following Authors:—The Author of "Molly Bawn," FRANK BARRETT, Miss BETHAM EDWARDS, Mrs. LOVETT CAMERON, MABEL COLLINS, Mrs. CROKER, J. D. DELILLE, RICHARD DOWLING, B. L. FARJEON, G. M. FENN, Mrs. FORRESTER, BRET HARTE, RICHARD ASHE KING, Mrs. MACQUOID, FITZGERALD MOLLOY, F. C. PHILIPS, Mrs. RIDDELL, "RITA," ANNIE THOMAS, WILLIAM WESTALL, &c. Each Novel will be tastefully bound in cloth gilt, and will contain a frontispiece by some well-known Artist.

---

\* \* MESSRS. WARD & DOWNEY'S *Illustrated Catalogue* contains Portraits of the Author of "Mehalah," the Author of "Molly Bawn," G. W. APPLETON, FRANK BARRETT, Mrs. Lovett Cameron, Mabel Collins, Mrs. B. M. Croker, Richard Dowling, B. L. Farjeon, George Manville Fenn, Percy Fitzgerald, Somerville Gibney, James Grant, Victor Hugo, Bret Harte, Richard Ashe King ("Basil"), Mrs. Macquoid, Fitzgerald Molloy, O'Neill Daunt, T. P. O'Connor, John Augustus O'Shea, Mrs. Panton, James Payn, F. C. Philips, Blanche Roosevelt, George Sand, Florence Warden, William Westall, and Harry Furniss.

---

Ward & Downey, Publishers, 12, York Street, Covent Garden.

ESTABLISHED IN THE REIGN OF GEORGE III.

# STREETER & CO.,



LONDON

AND

THE DIAMOND MINES, TIBAGY, BRAZIL.  
THE PEARL FISHERIES, COSACK, AUSTRALIA.

